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A Love Bite

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VOL.2**



Yaoi



Novel

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
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“Don’t cry. What’s there to cry about?” Munechika whispered.

“You made me cry. So let me,” Shiiba sobbed.

Munechika kissed the tears that were streaming down Shiiba’s face. His caresses felt good, but they couldn’t stop Shiiba from crying.

Forgive me just this once. Let me be weak. Let me cling to your strength. We can be together for a little while...

Written By

Saki Aida

January 3rd

Blood Type: AB

It's the best season to have a tasty beer outside. I want to go outdoors.

Illustrated By

Chiharu Nara

Born: June

Blood Type: O

I just came back from Cairo, and my bones are aching.



Written by
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Translation By Design



S Vol.2

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On top of the bed, a naked man rapidly moved his hips, his face contorted with ecstasy. A young man was under him, face down and hips raised high. Though he was obviously in pain, the young man didn't try to resist.

Another man sat nearby, calmly sipping a drink.

"Better than a woman?" he asked.

"Much better. He's so tight. Damn, I can't take much more," the naked man gasped, thrusting faster.

The boy tried to move away, but the man quickly pulled him back.

The boy's attempt at escape seemed to excite the man even more. He moaned and quivered as he grabbed the boy's hips with both hands.

The third man, the spectator, suddenly reached over, grabbed the boy's hair, and yanked up his head.

"Was it good for you, too?" he sneered.

"Pervert," the boy spat out.

"Your turn next. Better than just sitting there," the naked man recommended.

"No, thanks. I prefer to watch," the spectator said.

The naked man turned to the boy. "I love seeing another guy have his way with you. You look so dirty and pitiful. I suppose you want to run away now?"

The boy seemed about to say something, and then just shook his head, lost in a confusing world of pain and pleasure.

"Good, because I'll never let you go," the naked man snapped, his eyes blazing. "Remember this: You are mine, all mine. And you must never betray me, no matter what."

He seethed with jealousy when he watched other men with the boy, but also got off on those feelings.

The boy, on the other hand, silently prayed.

I would rather be consumed by the fires of hell...

But his wish would never come true. It was all just a beautiful dream.

However much he chased freedom, he would never find it, even if it was right at his fingertips.

As imaginary flames singed his body, the boy closed his eyes to his inner pain.

Chapter 1

The apartment block was on Meiji Street, 10 minutes from Shibuya. There was nothing unusual about it, but once a week the detectives of the Matsuda team gathered in a room on the seventh floor where they delivered progress reports on their respective lines of inquiry.

All of the detectives worked undercover, so they didn't attend the meeting unless they had crucial information to share. This out-of-the-way place had been chosen for safety, but the detectives were still wary about blowing their covers.

Masaki Shiiba exited the elevator and walked to the briefing room. Today his colleague, Nagakura, stood just outside the door, smoking a cigarette.

As soon as he saw Shiiba, Nagakura threw down his cigarette and ground it out with his shoe. As usual, he looked annoyed.

"Got a problem?" he snarled.

Nagakura had a bad habit of picking fights, so Shiiba hurried past without speaking. He went into the briefing room and closed the door behind him, right on Nagakura's foot.

"Ow! Be careful!" Nagakura griped.

"Come in and say that," Shiiba grunted.

Nagakura also belonged to COC5, the Counter Organized Crime Unit 5 of Community Safety, Arms and Narcotics. He hadn't broken any big cases yet, but consistently came up with good leads. Shiiba figured he was in his mid-30s.

Nagakura had a foul temper and was generally unsociable. On the other hand, he also had a reputation as an excellent lover with a long string of girlfriends. He seemed to have two completely different sides to him.

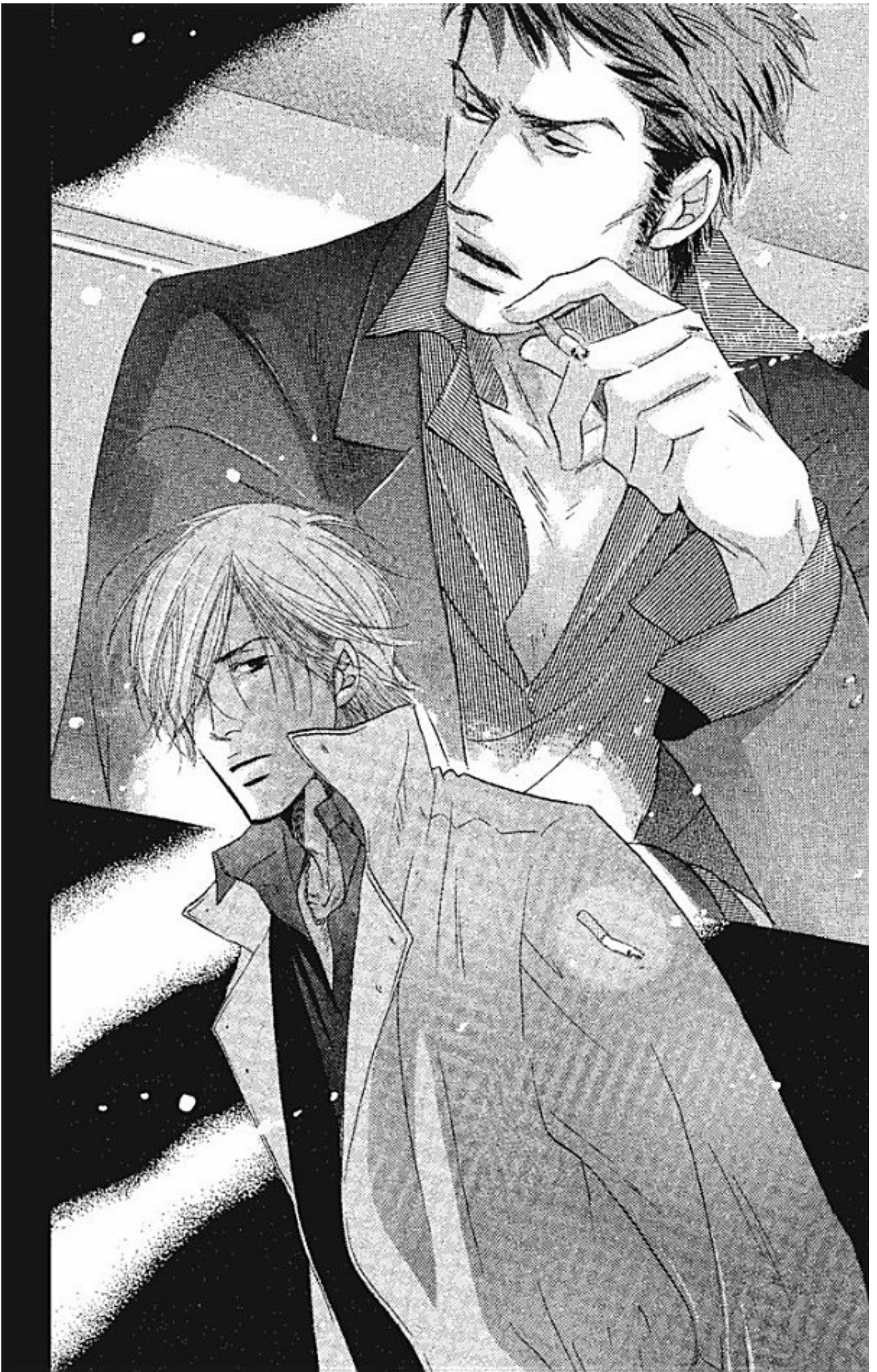
“Sorry I’m late,” Shiiba said just as Nagakura entered the room.

Takasaki, the section head, and Matsuda, the unit chief, had both been waiting for them. Today was not the usual meeting, so no other detectives were present. Last night Shiiba had received an emergency call from Takasaki. That wasn’t strange in itself, but why was Nagakura here, too?

“No, I’m sorry to call you at such short notice. Please sit down,” Takasaki directed.

Next to the jumble of desks was a fake-fur sofa. Shiiba and Nagakura sat side-by-side, facing Takasaki and Matsuda. Takasaki was in his mid-40s, Matsuda a bit younger. They were also non-career track, but highly-experienced detectives.

The Counter Organized Crime Unit-Gun Division worked to clamp down organized crime in the city. The detectives were separated into two teams: the Intelligence Team, which investigated black-market gun sales, and the Incidents Team, which used the information gathered by the Intelligence Team to seize guns and apprehend the suspects.



“Shiiba, good news about the Chinese massage parlor case. The Incidents Team arrested the men involved,” Takasaki said.

Shiiba nodded. He was not one to gloat when one of his leads led to an arrest. Once he handed over his findings, he moved right on to the next case.

“What did you want to speak with us about, sir?” Shiiba asked, anxious to get right to the point.

“Relax. You’re so impatient.” Matsuda grimaced. Shiiba was the youngest man here, and the most insolent, but Matsuda knew Shiiba wasn’t trying to insult him.

Shiiba never joked around, which made the other detectives wary of him. Part of this was just plain jealousy on the other detectives’ part, but also because no matter what anyone said about Shiiba, he never reacted.

He was also a loner. Usually detectives worked in pairs, but he operated by himself. Luckily for him, he never had to play office politics—something he was very bad at.

Shiiba’s lack of social skills occasionally bordered on arrogance, creating many misunderstandings and conflicts. But sheer pride kept him going through his unusual line of work.

Though still only 28, Shiiba had been very successful with something called “S work.” The “S” stood for a spy who gave information to the police.

Intelligence officers worked by finding an inside informant, someone closely involved in illegal activities. Since detectives worked very intimately with an S, they had to hide their identities. Secret investigations, intelligence-gathering, undercover work. None of the terms really captured the danger of S work, which was like walking on thin ice. Their real identities could always be revealed, putting their lives in grave danger.

“Anyway, Nagakura, you have no problems with Shiiba, right?” Takasaki asked.

“Tsk! He’s as good as anyone else, I guess,” Nagakura snorted.

He always talked like that, so Takasaki took no notice.

“Matsuda, please explain the situation,” Takasaki ordered.

“Sure.” Matsuda turned to Shiiba. “You know that Nagakura has been investigating the Ikkou Society, right?”

“Yeah.”

The Ikkou Society gang was based in Tokyo’s Minato area, with several satellite offices spread throughout the city. Lately, it had been feuding with the Yagami Group, another gang, and an all-out war between the two seemed inevitable.

COC5 had heard that the Ikkou Society was already collecting weapons, so its detectives were keeping the group under close surveillance.

“Nagakura has been able to establish that the Ikkou Society has a large cache of arms,” Matsuda revealed. “He’s infiltrated them under the false name of Okamura. He’s quickly made friends there, and has already been initiated into the gang.”

Shiiba had guessed as much. Nagakura hadn’t attended a meeting for months. Becoming a gang member was the most dangerous kind of work. You had to be extremely careful about where you went and who you were seen with.

“The other gang members trust him, so Nagakura’s been given some important jobs,” Matsuda went on. “But he still must be extra careful, of course. If he arouses suspicion now, his life could be in danger. That’s why we need your help.”

“What do you mean?” Shiiba asked.

“We need you to communicate with Nagakura’s S,” Matsuda answered. “He’s a buddy of Yukihiro Kunugi, the Ikkou Society president. Having an S this close means we can keep an eagle eye on Kunugi.”

“But will Nagakura’s S talk to me?” Shiiba wanted to know.

Informants often refused to talk to detectives other than the ones they already worked for, since everything was based on trust. Establishing close relationship with another detective felt way too risky to an S.

“Nagakura has already told him, so there should be no problem. Right, Nagakura?” Takasaki asked.

“Right.”

“Who is Nagakura’s S?” Shiiba asked.

Suddenly Takasaki looked uncomfortable.

“Uh, how do I put this,” he said with hesitation. “Nagakura’s S is sort of a concubine.”

“You mean some girl?” Shiiba was surprised that Nagakura was working with a female, but Takasaki’s frown quickly set him straight.

“It’s a man. A male lover. Kunugi is a homo,” Nagakura spat out, his tone full of venom.

“A very whimsical man,” Matsuda added.

“Kunugi swings both ways,” Nagakura went on. “He’s had both men and women. He gets off on keeping this boy around. The kid is just a prostitute.”

“Damn, I just don’t get it,” Takasaki said with a grimace.

“So what am I supposed to do?” Shiiba asked, trying to stay on the topic.

Takasaki quietly looked at him for a moment before he spoke.

“We need you to be Nagakura’s back-up, Shiiba,” he said bluntly. “We need to find out what kind of weapons the Ikkou Society has been stockpiling.”

“Support?” Shiiba said.

“Yes,” Takasaki confirmed. “Since Nagakura infiltrated the Ikkou Society, he’s had to keep a low profile. It’s particularly tough for him to meet with us. We need you to support him from the outside. Can you do it?”

Shiiba looked straight back at Takasaki.

“I see. You want me to be a messenger boy and follow Nagakura’s orders,” he snapped.

“Correct.” Takasaki nodded. “You just cracked that Chinese massage parlor

case. You can put your other work on hold for a while, right?”

Shiiba was such an excellent detective, the higher-ups often gave him extra duties. But Takasaki knew that this latest assignment would definitely piss Shiiba off.

He was right. Shiiba was not happy to abandon his cases right now. His current suspects had crazy habits. If Shiiba took his eyes off them now, they could very well disappear.

Shiiba believed his first responsibility was to his own S. He had worked hard to gain the trust of the man, and had been rewarded with several nuggets of very useful information. He would even betray his own co-workers, if necessary, to protect his S. Results were not important.

Unfortunately, Shiiba was really in no position to refuse, despite his misgivings.

“Understood, sir. I’ll support Nagakura,” he affirmed.

Takasaki looked relieved. The two superiors left the room, leaving the details to the two detectives.

Nagakura immediately propped his feet up on the table.

“You don’t look too happy,” he grunted.

Shiiba turned to look at him. Nagakura had a hard-looking face, with sharp eyes and thin lips.

No wonder the Yakuza trust him, Shiiba thought.

“It must really suck to be forced to help me,” Nagakura drawled lazily.

“Yep,” Shiiba said easily. “I have my hands full as it is. But an order’s an order, and I intend to do the job.”

“Whatever,” Nagakura grunted, leaning back on the sofa.

What’s he thinking? Shiiba wondered.

Was Nagakura afraid to involve someone else in all this? Or did he just not want to be bothered? Either way, he didn’t seem to want to talk about it.

“Well, then. Contact me if you need me,” Shiiba finally said, standing up to leave.

He heard Nagakura mutter behind him, “Northern Hotel, 505. It’s a business hotel near Higashi Nagano station. Two o’clock tomorrow. You can meet my S.”

Shiiba turned around to reply, but Nagakura had closed his eyes.

“I’m taking a nap now. Take off,” Nagakura hissed. In his mind, this conversation was over.

Shiiba glanced at him then walked out.

The room was quiet now. Shiiba sat on the bed with his eyes closed and swallowed.

The semen stung the back of his throat, but not because the room felt dry. In fact, the temperature and humidity were perfect. It hurt because he’d had his mouth around Keigo Munechika’s penis for what had seemed like an eternity.

Sitting up, Shiiba poured a glass of water from the jug on the bedside table. He gulped it down, enjoying the soothing coolness running down his throat. As he put down the glass, a pair of arms pounced on him from behind.

“Get off. No more,” Shiiba said, shaking off Munechika. He had stopped at the apartment in Roppongi to check on his S, but Munechika had quickly led him to the bedroom. They had been sweating it out together for over an hour.

“Aw, c’mon,” Munechika whined. “I just want a post-coital hug.”

He wouldn’t take no for an answer and pushed Shiiba back onto the sheets. Shiiba didn’t look pleased, but let him have his way. This bed was Munechika’s domain. As long as Shiiba was in it, he was Munechika’s plaything. His job was to satisfy Munechika’s every need.

But Munechika wasn’t lying when he said he just wanted to hug. He pulled Shiiba closer, stroking his skin and planting soft kisses across his naked body.

Shiiba pouted, but didn’t complain. He didn’t really care for cuddling, but

didn't want to tell Munechika not to touch him after sex. Shiiba preferred to suffer in silence.

Munechika laughed at him. "Always the same. You're a little tomcat when we're doing it, but soooo cold when it's all over."

"You got a problem with that?" Shiiba snapped. "I don't need hugs. Just smoke or snore or whatever, I really don't mind."

"But this is my dessert, Shiiba!" Munechika protested. "Don't take all the fun out of it. I have the right to have all of you, especially tonight."

Whatever Shiiba said, it always rolled off Munechika like water on a duck's back. Shiiba ended up looking like a fool, and tonight Munechika had a special advantage. Munechika expected payback for giving Shiiba some very useful information, so he'd called Shiiba to request a "full course meal," one whole night of sex.

"I wanna eat you until I'm stuffed," Munechika purred, grinning from ear to ear.

Shiiba glared at him. Munechika ignored him and nibbled on his earlobe. The tip of his tongue worked its way down Shiiba's neck. Munechika's lust should have been more than satisfied already, but this gentle caressing seemed to reignite his flames of passion, still smoldering from their last encounter.

Shiiba stirred a little. He pushed Munechika away and pulled himself up. Even though they had already been at it for an hour, just one touch of Munechika's hand and Shiiba was ready for more. He hated not being able to control his own body.

"If you want dessert, get a girl," he growled. "A sexy little babe who'll whisper sweet nothings in your ear."

"Why are you sulking?" Munechika whined as Shiiba got up. "Where are you going?"

"Shower," Shiiba muttered, not bothering to turn around.

For Shiiba, this full course meal was over, and he needed Munechika to

understand that.

“But you’ll just get sweaty again,” Munechika teased.

Shiiba ignored him and went into the bathroom. Finally alone, he sighed deeply.

The truth was, he was tired of having sex with Munechika. What had started out as a novelty had quickly become a bore. Though Shiiba’s body had gotten used to having sex with a man, his heart never could. The act totally drained him, both physically and mentally.

Shiiba’s feelings of disgust betrayed his true feelings toward Munechika. He didn’t want to become some kind of sex doll, so he resisted. Every time they had sex, Shiiba felt totally stressed out, terrified to let down his guard around Munechika.

It was pleasurable, too pleasurable, in fact. Shiiba often lost himself in Munechika’s arms and then hated himself for that. But their relationship was strictly professional, after all. Having sex with Munechika is a necessary evil, Shiiba kept telling himself.

Shiiba couldn’t let himself like Munechika too much. If he really let go, he’d lose all judgment, so he couldn’t get overly attached. He was a police officer, and Munechika was his S. Shiiba couldn’t afford to forget those facts, not even for a second.

After he finished his shower, Shiiba slipped on a robe and opened the door. Munechika was sitting on the sofa, sipping wine and watching the news. He wore only a battered pair of jeans.

“That was one long shower,” he wryly observed, stretching out his long legs.

Munechika didn’t look like a typical Japanese male. His arms and stomach were well defined, his chest broad and buff.

Since Munechika acted too cocky already, Shiiba never complimented him on his body, but he was still a little jealous. No matter how much Shiiba trained, he could never get that toned. His police officer father had enrolled him in Kendo and Karate at a young age. Shiiba was definitely no weakling, but he still looked

slightly androgynous, taking after his mother.

“Don’t zone out now,” Munechika warned. “We’re doing it again, remember?”

“You are the most sexed-up guy I’ve ever met,” Shiiba complained. He didn’t like being reminded of the inevitable.

“Don’t flatter me too much,” Munechika said with a grin, pouring another glass of wine.

Shiiba sat down next to him and glanced at the TV.

“Early this morning, police seized a large cache of weapons in Kabukicho,” the anchorwoman was saying.

Munechika looked at Shiiba meaningfully.

“Yep. That was the Incidents Team,” Shiiba said without emotion.

“Now don’t be modest! That was all your doing, right?” Munechika beamed with pride, but Shiiba still looked blank.

A month ago, Munechika had alerted him about a Chinese massage parlor on Hanami Street that doubled as a weapons storage facility.

This massage parlor didn’t limit its services to massages. “Special Health Treatments,” better known as hand jobs, were also on the menu. Going all the way was officially against the rules, yet still tolerated. Massage parlors like this one were often fronts for other operations.

The Chinese woman who owned the place had a lover in the Shanghai Mafia. Shiiba discovered that the man used the shop as a front for selling guns, which was all the information the Incidents Team needed.

The Team staked out the joint, waiting patiently for the right time to enter. Luckily, it was able to get a search warrant when some Chinese students who worked there told them about an upcoming deal.

Working in a massage parlor on a student visa was strictly against the law. Students caught in the act were routinely expelled from school and deported from Japan. The Incidents Team promised to turn a blind eye if the students let

it search the place.

Shiiba and the other members of the Intelligence Division only collected leads, so they never interfered with the Incidents Team. There was no room for egos in this work.

The Incidents Team also kept its own counsel, never asking an operative how he got his information. Each side had its own motives, but one prime objective united them: find the guns and arrest their owners.

“Kabukicho is still the haunt of the Chinese Mafia,” Shiiba muttered, putting down his glass.

Munechika grunted. “They’re nothing like the Yakuza, though. Just petty criminals who cling to their own kind and rake in the cash.”

“But they own clubs. They must have connections and some funding,” Shiiba said thoughtfully.

“They have money, but their women pay the bills,” Munechika explained. “Kabukicho is their domain. After World War II, Asians from other countries bought up the area. The desperate Japanese sold the land for next to nothing. Most of the deeds have Chinese, Taiwanese, or Korean names on them.”

Munechika poured more wine into his glass before he continued.

“In the late 80s, Nakasone’s government planned to ease visa restrictions on part-time work to attract more foreign students. Thousands of Chinese legally entered Japan, but started to work illegally. Women flooded into Kabukicho as hostesses, hoping to catch a rich Japanese man, but Chinese men soon went along for the ride.”

Shiiba knew that much. During the bubble economy, the Japanese government saw these special entrance permits as a way to attract more workers, while the Chinese government hoped to increase their foreign capital. As a result, students overstayed their visas in huge numbers. Now the rules on residency for Chinese citizens were very strict.

“Did the Taiwanese mafia do the same thing?” Shiiba asked, wanting to know more.

“Yep,” Munechika answered. “The women flock to the neon lights and the men closely follow. But the Taiwanese *liumang* really are the worst when it comes to using women.”

Liumang was Chinese for “criminals,” and also a code word for the Chinese Mafia.

“In the late 80s, the police tried like hell to stamp them out,” Munechika went on. “Lots of them hid in Kabukicho. Back then, Taiwanese clubs and hostesses were all the rage. The thugs hooked the ladies on gambling, took all their money, and knocked them around if they opened their mouths.”

“But the Japanese Yakuza use women, too,” Shiiba pointed out.

Munechika had seemed to forget about that. Some Yakuza made women work in brothels to pay off their debts, giving them drugs to keep them quiet. If a woman didn’t make enough money, she would be sold. Hopelessly in debt and hooked on drugs, these women were left with no choice.

“Of course the Yakuza use women,” Munechika admitted. “It’s a good business. But the Chinese are different. They happily kick them around. Some girls even come to the Yakuza for help. Let me put my head on your knees.”

“Huh?” Shiiba croaked, surprised at Munechika’s sudden request.

Munechika rested his head on Shiiba’s lap.

“What are you doing? You’re too heavy,” Shiiba complained.

“No, I’m comfy. You want me to keep talking, right?” Munechika said, smiling up at Shiiba. He was so predictable.

“Okay, go ahead.” Shiiba sighed, resigned to his fate as usual.

But Munechika was always interesting. He was a true expert on mafia history. You could almost say he had a master’s degree in the world of crime.

“C’mon, you should be happy,” he cajoled. “Detectives always need more info, right?”

“Enough with the sarcasm,” Shiiba snapped. “The Kabukicho Yakuza must have some plans, right? Or do they just sit back and bite their fingernails while

these foreigners take over their territory?”

“Nope,” Munechika said. He had lifted Shiiba’s robe and was gently fondling his knee.

Shiiba flinched, but didn’t say anything. He didn’t want to interrupt Munechika’s train of thought.

“Once, my gang went to Taiwan to meet with them. It turned into a big fight. Their gang leaders hightailed it to Japan and called a meeting of all the *liumang* in Kabukicho.”

Munechika’s hand crept toward the inside of Shiiba’s left thigh. Shiiba quickly grabbed his wrist.



“So? What did the other Taiwanese in Kabukicho do then?” he demanded to know, but Munechika kept quiet. Shiiba let go of Munechika’s hand, which

continued to grope his legs.

“They didn’t do anything,” Munechika finally said.

“What do you—” Shiiba started to ask, when Munechika suddenly grabbed his cock.

As Shiiba let out a little gasp, Munechika looked up at him meaningfully. Captured by those deep eyes, Shiiba felt electric shocks run down his spine.

“Not a single person came,” Munechika calmly continued. “The Taiwanese could care less about the gang leaders of the Taiwan *liumang*. In other words, the guys in Kabukicho no longer considered themselves gang members, they had no desire to belong to any organization.”

Munechika rubbed his hand even faster over Shiiba’s penis, hitting every sweet spot. Shiiba could feel passion building again inside him.

“When the bubble burst, lots of Taiwanese went back home,” Munechika explained. “But then the Chinese came from Shanghai and quickly took their places. These Shanghai thugs already know the business. They run most of the Kabukicho clubs, and import their hostesses from home territory.”

So that’s why he’s telling me all this, Shiiba thought. He wants to drive out Shanghai liumang.

No doubt about it, Munechika definitely had his own agenda. It was no coincidence that his dirt on secret gun dealing all involved the Chinese.

Though Munechika looked like a young salaryman, he was actually a leading player in the Matsukura Group. The regional Koujin Association, along with the Matsukura Group (its umbrella organization), had experienced a lot of resistance in the past.

Though Munechika was the illegitimate child of the Matsukura Group’s last president, he wasn’t directly involved in gang activities. Munechika was a legitimate businessman. His only real tie to the gang was his half-brother.

Munechika had been Shiiba’s S for over three months now, and he’d been more valuable than anyone could have predicted. With his help, the

Metropolitan Police had seized a huge arsenal of firearms, including hundreds of rounds of ammo. Nine people had been apprehended so far. No other S had ever delivered the goods in such a short time.

As Munechika's hand kept on massaging Shiiba's manhood, he kissed Shiiba's chest.

Shiiba gasped when Munechika nibbled on his pale pink nipple. "In...the b-bedroom. Not on the s-sofa..." he stammered.

"Nope," Munechika purred. "It'll be more interesting to take you here."

"But..."

"Relax!" Munechika urged. "I've already seen your goodies, right?"

Shiiba couldn't deny that painful truth.

"Open your legs a little," Munechika ordered, gazing into Shiiba's eyes.

Shiiba did as told, spreading his legs wide. He felt Munechika staring at his most intimate parts. Munechika gently lifted Shiiba's legs to his shoulders.

"You actually like this?" Shiiba asked with surprise.

"Yep. It's an amazing view," Munechika teased, bending his head. He swallowed Shiiba's cock in one motion, and soon his tongue started to work its magic, licking and sucking.

Each time Shiiba slept with Munechika, a strange man he didn't know seemed to emerge from inside him. Munechika completely controlled this other man, who was wrapped in raging lust for his S.

Shiiba was worried that someday he would forget who he was, or that his true sexuality would be revealed. Being with Munechika was a heady mixture of shame and ecstasy. Even if he let himself go with Munechika, Shiiba still felt embarrassed. But when he remembered that Munechika was his S, bought and paid for with his body, Shiiba felt absolutely no regret. That was the mystery of their sexual relationship.

How much should he open up? How far could he let Munechika inside?

Though Shiiba had never really set any boundaries, Munechika was already lodged deep inside his psyche. His S was like sweet poison. When he felt Shiiba become distracted, Munechika delved even deeper. By the time Shiiba noticed what was happening, it was already too late. Munechika killed him, then revived him, and then killed him again. It was almost masochistic.

Swooning from Munechika's sucking, Shiiba suddenly remembered what Takasaki had said earlier that day.

Kunugi is a homo.

Shiiba's blood ran cold, recalling Takasaki's utter contempt for the man.

Having sex with a female S was something to brag about, but sleeping with a man was a whole different stroke. His colleagues would never congratulate him for that. In fact, they'd be totally disgusted.

Shiiba's rising pleasure was now tinged with bitterness. But he got the results, didn't he? So what was the big deal?

S work was against the law anyway, and Shiiba had already crossed the line countless times before. If he kept his own hands clean, he'd never get to the guns at the bottom of a very polluted mire.

Chapter 2

Nagakura's hotel was old and dank. The hall carpet had once been red, but now looked faded and stained. The wallpaper peeled in places, while patches of mold bloomed on the walls.

Room 505. Shiiba knocked, and the door opened a crack. Nagakura peered out and quickly checked the hallway, making sure Shiiba was alone. Satisfied, he quickly undid the chain and let Shiiba enter.

"Sit wherever," Nagakura said, taking the only chair in the room.

Shiiba had no choice, but to sit on the double bed. He looked around with dismay at the small, gloomy room. The dirty window had been nailed shut, and, though it was sunny outside, it let in little light.

"So where's your S?" Shiiba asked.

"He'll be here soon," Nagakura assured him, sipping a can of beer.

He looked steadily at Shiiba, not taking his eyes off him. In this career, it was difficult to separate your work from your private life, but Shiiba was horrified to see Nagakura drinking right in front of him.

"His name is Mao Takanashi," Nagakura said.

"Which characters does he use for his surname?" Shiiba asked, needing as much information as possible.

"He uses 'small' and 'bird,' but it seems to suit him. He's 20, born in Higashikurumeshi, Tokyo. High-school dropout. Lost his mother early and was raised by his father. In high school, his father died, too. He's been Kunugi's lover

for the past two years. His apartment is in his name, but Kunugi pays his rent, along with living expenses. Kunugi also controls his life.”

“How long has he been your S?” Shiiba asked.

“About a year. The Yakuza of the Ikkou look after him. Mao is Kunugi’s favorite, and Kunugi sees him at least once a day,” Nagakura said, his smile full of innuendo.

He finished his beer and tossed the can into a dingy wastebasket. Shiiba didn’t have to ask what Nagakura thought of his S. Nagakura’s snide attitude made it crystal clear.

There was a knock on the door. Nagakura jumped up to answer.

“You should be on time,” he criticized.

“Aw, shut up. I’m only 10 minutes late,” Mao shot back. Suddenly he noticed Shiiba and scowled. “So this is your colleague, huh?” he scoffed.

“Yep. This is—” Nagakura started to say, but Shiiba quickly interrupted.

“I’m Shibano,” he said quietly.

Shibano was his other name. Nagakura obviously didn’t know Shiiba’s current alias. A detective almost always used a different name with informants, but Munechika never called him Shibano. Shiiba let him use his real name.

As Mao looked Shiiba up and down, Shiiba looked straight back at him.

“He’s a detective? Sure doesn’t look like one,” Mao grumbled.

He did have a point. Shiiba wore vintage jeans and an army jacket, his hair dyed a brassy blonde. A pair of black boots was added to the look. No wonder Mao was skeptical.

“Maybe I don’t look like it, but I am,” Shiiba assured him. “I can’t show you my I.D., but you must know why, right?”

The detectives in Shiiba’s division needed special permission to carry their police I.D. cards.

“How old are you?” Mao asked, changing the subject.

“Twenty-eight.”

Mao seemed to think Shiiba was younger.

Shiiba also gave Mao the once-over. Now that he’d actually seen him, he could understand Kunugi’s attraction. Mao was not only as cute as button, his hair was California blonde. Kunugi had probably fallen in love with him at first sight.

Mao was dressed like anyone else his age, but there was still something special about him. Though he was only 20, his aura was surprisingly calm. Mao wasn’t just self assured, he had a natural serenity about him.

“Okay, Mao,” Nagakura said, getting down to business. “As I said on the phone, you will communicate with this man instead of me for a while.”

At Nagakura’s suggestion, Mao and Shiiba exchanged phone numbers.

“Give him your address, too,” Nagakura told Mao.

“But why?” Mao whined.

“Just give it to him, okay?” Nagakura snapped.

Mao kept sulking. Suddenly Nagakura slapped him across the face.

He’s definitely done that before, Shiiba thought. *Mao didn’t even look shocked.*

“Use your mouth on Kunugi’s cock!” Nagakura hollered. “No backtalk! Just do what I say!”

Mao glared at Nagakura and rubbed his red cheek. Then he sighed deeply and told Shiiba his address. “Residence West Shinjuku, Apartment 706.”

“I’ll be a full member of the Ikkou soon,” Nagakura warned. “Don’t contact me even if something happens. If they discover that Kunugi’s boy-toy knows me, I’ll be in big trouble. And so will you.”

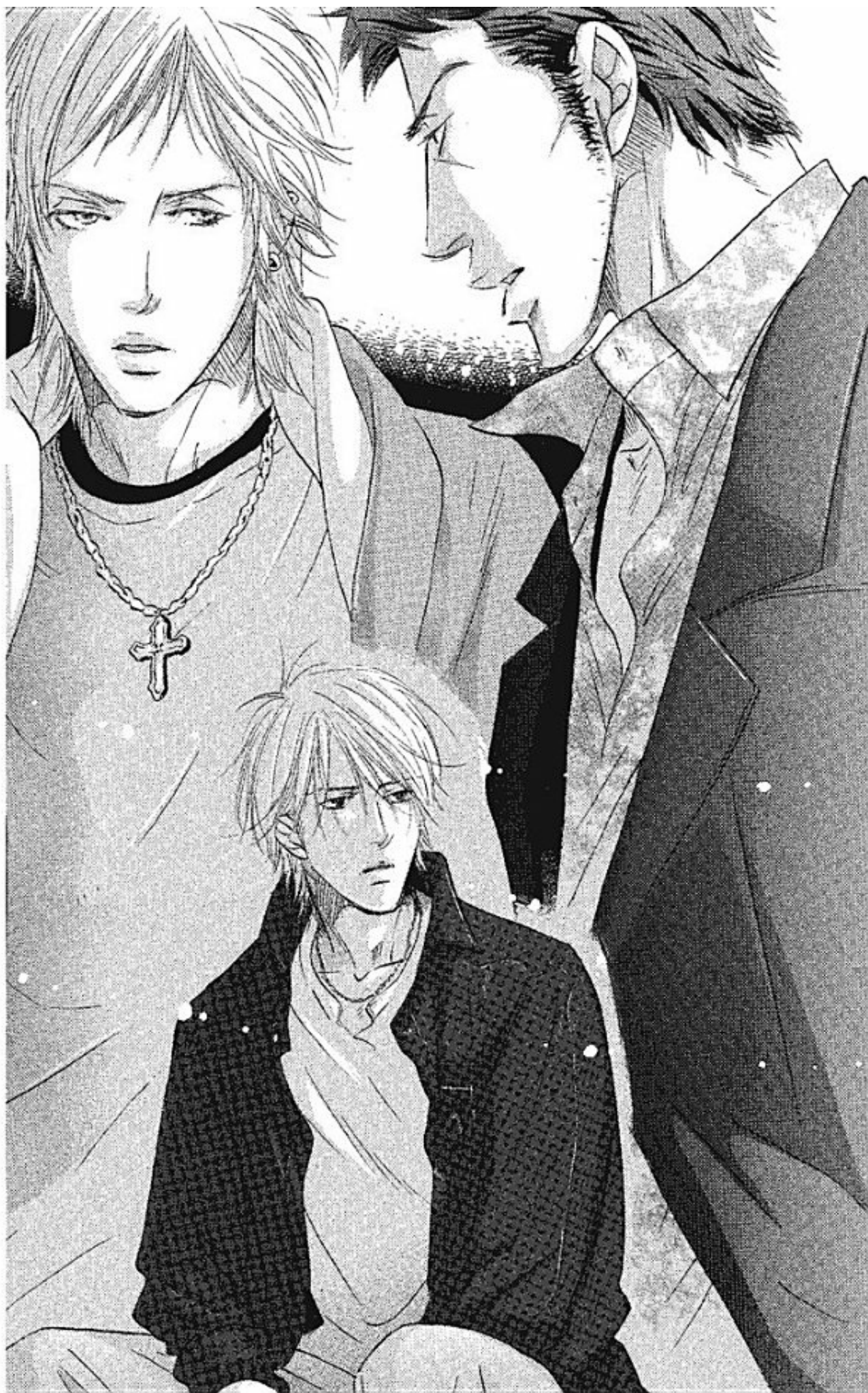
“What if I hear something about the weapons?” Mao asked.

“Tell Shiiba or whatever,” Nagakura said. He sounded like he didn’t care, but Shiiba did.

“Are you sure? This is your case, after all,” Shiiba reminded him.

“I don’t care who gets the credit,” Nagakura snapped.

Shiiba had never expected this, especially from Nagakura. Detectives usually hated sharing their cases, and Shiiba was no exception. Detectives needed that sense of personal achievement to keep them motivated for the next case.



“You and I are different,” Nagakura muttered, as if reading Shiiba’s thoughts. “I could care less about the glory. I’m more worried about my pension. That’s

what keeps me working. Why else would I work with filthy homo scum like this kid?”

He suddenly pulled hard on Mao’s hair. “Look, Mao! Another pretty boy like you!” he sneered, pointing at Shiiba. “Why don’t you give it up to him? Homos love a threesome, right?”

Mao looked pained, but wisely kept quiet. Their relationship evidently hinged on Nagakura’s violence.

“I’ve heard he’s real good,” Nagakura persisted. “Why not give him a go?”

Shiiba angrily grabbed Nagakura’s arm.

“Stop it. I don’t know what point you’re trying to make, but you’re the one with the problem,” he growled.

Nagakura released Mao and pushed Shiiba away.

“Don’t act so high and mighty. You must do things you don’t mention in your reports. How else would you get all those fantastic leads?”

Shiiba fell silent. Nagakura had accidentally hit the nail on the head, but the man just laughed.

“C’mon, don’t look like that,” he said consolingly. “I don’t care what you do, so give me the same courtesy. Neither of us is lily-white, after all.”

Nagakura glanced at his watch and headed for the door, shoving Shiiba aside.

“Off to meet someone. You two will get on like gangbusters, so I’ll leave you to it,” he said in a rush.

After Nagakura left, Mao flopped onto the bed. His hair was a mess and his cheek was still bright red.

“So that’s how he always treats you?” Shiiba asked.

“Yep, he’s a true homophobe,” Mao said. “People like me disgust him.”

“Is he always sexually harassing you?” Shiiba demanded.

Mao smiled a little, clearly amused at the term “sexual harassment.”

“Who cares if he calls me a pervert? I’m not shocked that I disgust him. I actually disgust myself. He can call me a filthy homo all he wants,” he muttered, taking out a cigarette. He lit it with one of the matches that Nagakura had left behind. There was a feminine elegance in his lean physique and youthful face.

“That guy is worse than the Yakuza,” he went on, taking a deep puff.

“How did you start working with him?” Shiiba asked.

“I didn’t know he was a detective at first. We met at a bar and started drinking together, but now I know that that was just a set-up. Later, he invited me to a hotel. I thought we were friends, so I said okay. While we were in bed, he started asking all these questions like ‘What do you think about Kunugi?’ and ‘Are you happy with your life?’”

Mao sighed and shook his head before he continued. “Idiot me, I thought he was just jealous, so I told him the truth. I told him that Kunugi made me sick. Suddenly Nagakura told me he’d recorded the whole thing. After that I had to follow his orders or get beat up.”

He gave Shiiba a hard look. “By the way, I told Nagakura everything already. So don’t tail me, okay? I’ll be in big trouble if I get ousted.”

“I understand,” Shiiba said. “But the Ikkou Society is heading into dangerous territory. You must know that. If a gang war starts now, innocent people could get hurt. We have to find the weapons and stop them.”

“Why should I know about all that? I have no interest in Yakuza crap,” Mao muttered.

“You should,” Shiiba warned. “Kunugi looks after you. If a gang war starts, the other side will head straight for him *and* his companions.”

Mao smiled wryly. “Maybe, but that has nothing to do with me. Besides, if he got killed, my life would be so much easier.”

Mao’s cold eyes showed no feeling for Kunugi whatsoever. This life wasn’t the one that Mao had originally wanted.

“How often does Kunugi come to your bed?” Shiiba inquired.

“About twice a week, but he’s been busy lately,” Mao revealed. “But Kunugi doesn’t talk much about his work, okay? He just fucks me and goes home. He never answers my questions, either.”

“Yet you’ve given Nagakura information?” Shiiba asked shrewdly.

“I had to, or...” Mao hesitated.

“Or what?” Shiiba prompted him.

“He said if I didn’t give him information, he’d tell Kunugi I was sleeping around,” Mao admitted. “The bastard.”

Many detectives made informants cooperate by playing on their vulnerability. They would discover the informants’ deepest secrets and then blackmail them. Shiiba had occasionally stooped that low himself, but Nagakura’s methods just didn’t seem right.

“If Kunugi heard that I’d been badmouthing him, he’d probably just beat me. But if he heard I’d been sleeping with other men, he’d definitely kill me,” Mao said seriously. “So I look at his diary and cell phone history while he’s in the bathroom.”

He reached for another cigarette, but his box was empty. Shiiba took out his own box and offered one stick to him.

“Thanks,” Mao muttered. He took a puff and scowled.

“You don’t like Caster smokes?” Shiiba inquired.

“Just not used to it,” Mao said. “They all taste bad to me. Maybe it’s that weird vanilla flavor. You always smoke menthols?”

“Yep, though they say it makes you impotent,” Shiiba said. “Think that’s true?”

“No way,” Mao scoffed, “though smoking does affect your circulation, especially downstairs. I don’t think it’s the menthol.”

“I thought it must be just a myth,” Shiiba muttered.

Suddenly Mao smiled, for the first time since they’d met.

He looks so innocent, Shiiba thought.

Yet he must have started sleeping with Kunugi when he was just 18. But how in the world did he get involved in a situation like this?

“For the next few weeks, I’ll be Nagakura’s messenger,” Shiiba said. “If you notice anything unusual, please call me, even if it’s the middle of the night.”

Mao suddenly seemed to perk up.

“Hey! If I find out where the Ikkou Society stores their guns, will he finally let me go?” he asked, referring to Nagakura.

“Beats me.” Shiiba shrugged. “But it’s likely.”

Mao wasn’t a gang member, but a lover could still get information. When the police finally broke the case, his usefulness would be over.

“Okay.” Mao sighed. He stared into space, puffing away.

“Why do I have to do this?” Munechika grumbled from the back of the Benz.

Shiiba was sitting next to him.

“Now don’t be stubborn. Here, put this in your pocket,” Shiiba said firmly, handing him a tiny radio transmitter the size of a business card. Munechika slipped it into his chest pocket, pouting all the while. Shiiba then took out a receiving device that looked exactly like a cell phone, and made sure everything was working properly.

“Boss,” the driver suddenly said. “I don’t want to go to Mr. Sagami’s dinner. I’ll wait here with Mr. Shiiba, okay?”

“Why, Kaname?” Munechika whined, looking annoyed. “Come with me. There’ll be some good food.”

“No, thanks, sir,” Kaname said bluntly.

“Saikawa can go instead.”

The gruesome giant next to Kaname turned to Munechika and bowed his

head. His big black suit made him look like a bodyguard. Though it was a private dinner, Munechika was assistant to the head of the Matsukura Group, so he couldn't go solo.

"So that's why Saikawa tagged along! Damn, this sucks," Munechika huffed.

Kaname stayed cool in his high-collared suit, tuning out Munechika's complaints. He followed Munechika like a shadow, but never made any kind of discernable expression.

Officially, Kaname was Munechika's personal secretary, but he didn't mind getting his hands dirty. He never lost his cool, though he hadn't witnessed any really rough stuff so far. His muscles bulged under his clothes. He was just that kind of guy.

Soon they approached the hotel where Kaname had made dinner reservations. He drove into a shadowy parking lot.

"The dinner is on the 13th floor, in the Flower Room. Saikawa, make sure that nothing happens," Kaname directed.

Saikawa nodded and got out of the car, smoothly opening the back door for Munechika.

"I'm relying on you, Munechika," Shiiba said.

"Don't expect too much," Munechika said unhappily. "They're planning for war, so things will be tense. He won't discuss anything important."

He followed Saikawa to the elevator. Shiiba watched them both disappear.

"Care to sit up front, Mr. Shiiba?" Kaname asked politely.

Shiiba moved to the passenger seat. Almost immediately, he heard Munechika's voice on the receiver.

"Shiiba! Can you hear me?"

Shiiba sighed with relief. At least the equipment was working. Munechika seemed to be testing it in the elevator.

"This time, I'll do what you want," Munechika was saying. "Next time, you do

what I want.”

I always do what you want, Shiiba wanted to say.

Sagami, the man Munechika was meeting, was a member of the famous Ikkou Society. Four years ago, the Kunugi Group, the Kuroda Group, and the Ryoutou Group had joined forces. This union had instantly increased their turf, but also whipped up a torrent of internal fighting.

Munechika and Sagami were personal acquaintances from back in the old days. When Shiiba heard about their friendship, he quickly seized the opportunity to get more intelligence. Munechika had wildly protested at first, but Shiiba had finally won him over.

Right now Shiiba’s main job was to support Nagakura, but he still wanted to find out where the Ikkou Society hid their guns. Shiiba’s bosses never minded if he went a little off track, as long as he delivered.

Suddenly Shiiba heard another voice.

“Munechika, long time no see,” said a man with a heavy accent.

“Sorry to call you on the spur of the moment. Are you busy right now?” Munechika was saying.

“A little” was the reply.

Shiiba looked over at Kaname, who nodded. The other man was definitely Sagami.

“Sagami was originally from the Kuroda Group, but he’s not too friendly with Kunugi, their president,” Kaname revealed.

“What kind of guy is Kunugi?” Shiiba inquired.

Kaname plainly stated the facts.

“Forty-two, married twice, divorced twice, no kids. One female lover and one male lover, as far as I know. One of them you know, Mao Takanashi. The girl works in a Ginza club. They’ve been together for so long, she’s practically his wife.”

“It that so?” Shiiba said idly.

“Kunugi joined the Yamato Group at 20 and quickly climbed the ladder,” Kaname continued. “When the gang disbanded, he and his friends formed the Kunugi Group. That was eight years ago. The Kunugi Group, the Kuroda Group, and the Ryoutou Group eventually joined forces to form the Ikkou Society. They made Kunugi their first president. He’s smart, but he’s also arrogant. So he has loads of enemies, both inside and outside the gang.”

Shiiba was impressed by Kaname’s answer. The driver seemed to be a veritable fountain of gang knowledge. Munechika had once told him that Kaname was a valuable asset, and he definitely hadn’t been exaggerating.

Judging from the sounds coming from the receiver, dinner had begun. Munechika waited for the right moment, and then casually popped the million-dollar-question.

“Sagami, what is the Ikkou Society planning? Are they really starting something with the Yagami Group?”

“That’s what President Kunugi wants,” Sagami replied, “but it won’t be easy. We simply can’t sustain a long war. It needs to be short and quick.”

“You’re prepared for one already?” Munechika asked.

“When the time comes, the president will supply the guns,” Sagami admitted.

“But that many guns will attract attention,” Munechika commented. “Thanks to the cops, weapons are impossible to get in this city.”

“That’s why only Mr. Kunugi knows where our guns are,” Sagami replied. “But no one seems to agree on the best time to make a move against the Yagami Group, not even his closest advisers.”

Shiiba wouldn’t find out where the guns were tonight. That information would have to come from Kunugi, the only person who actually knew their secret location.

“Anyway, what about you?” Sagami suddenly asked. “I haven’t heard any good gossip lately. Your little brother isn’t really suited to run the Matsukura

Group, is he?”

“It’s always the same with a change of leadership,” Munechika answered. “Things will calm down soon.”

“You’re a fool to support him from behind,” Sagami scoffed. “You should just do it yourself. Everyone wanted you as the next—”

“I don’t really want to talk about it,” Munechika said firmly, cutting Sagami off.

The rest of the conversation was about Yakuza business and Japan’s economic troubles, nothing of real interest to Shiiba. After dinner was over, Munechika returned to the car.

“You won’t get anything more than that,” Munechika said, as soon he got inside.

“It was plenty. We now know that Kunugi’s our man,” Shiiba said.

“Just how do you expect to get him?” Munechika retorted. “Didn’t you hear? Even his henchmen don’t know where the weapons are. You won’t get very far with this one.”

“Then I’ll try Mao Takanashi,” Shiiba said calmly.

Munechika frowned. “The boy-toy? Is that necessary? Doesn’t the case belong to some other detective?”

“Yeah, but I want to be involved, too. I’m not only a messenger boy,” Shiiba replied.

Munechika smiled grimly. “You detectives really love your secrets, don’t you?” he muttered. He seemed to be hinting at something more.

Shiiba gave him a hard look. “What are you saying?”

“Whenever you smell something bad, you won’t rest until you’ve sniffed it out,” Munechika replied.

“So what’s the problem? It’s my job,” Shiiba grumbled.

Munechika frowned and kept quiet. Normally he gave as good as he got, but

he was strangely passive today. Shiiba guessed that Munechika was still mad about his dinner with Sagami. It did cross the lines of what an S was supposed to do.

I could just thank him, Shiiba thought, but then Munechika would have even more power over him.

It was exactly like taming a dog. If the master was too kind, the dog would stop obeying him. The master had to take control and not get pulled along by his pet. Shiiba knew Munechika was unhappy, but he kept his mouth shut.

After he left Munechika, Shiiba went to Shinjuku. He was tailing one of his surveillance targets when Nagakura called.

“Come to the hotel again,” Nagakura ordered.

“Okay.”

Shiiba hated to be interrupted in the middle of an investigation, but Nagakura’s needs came first now. He could also tell him about Munechika’s dinner with Sagami.

Soon Shiiba stood outside Room 505, knocking on the door.

Nagakura peered out at him. “Get in here,” he growled, reeking of booze.

Shiiba hesitated for a split second, and then entered the room.

Nagakura plopped down on the bed. “So what happened?” he asked.

Shiiba quickly relayed the new information. Nagakura barely acknowledged him and silently filled a glass with wine.

There was an air of decadence about Nagakura as he threw the liquor down his throat. He had perfectly assimilated himself into the criminal world. Now he looked like a true Yakuza.

“So nobody knows where the guns are?” He frowned, undoing the top buttons of his ugly shirt. “It won’t be easy for me to find out, either.” He paused to light a cigarette. “Tomorrow I go to Osaka with the gang. Just do what you

want until I get back.” He shrugged. He obviously had lost all enthusiasm for his work.

“Munechika seems pretty useful,” he went on. “How did you get someone from the Matsukura Group? He’s not the type to work for money. What hold do you have over him?”

“I don’t have to tell you,” Shiiba muttered.

In the back of his mind, he saw Nagakura hitting Mao. He could never respect this man after seeing that, and Nagakura seemed to sense his disgust.

“Got a problem?” he snorted.

Shiiba wisely kept quiet.

“Your high-and-mighty attitude really pisses me off,” Nagakura taunted. “Didn’t the Yakuza kill your sister? You get along with them quite well, all things considered. They say if you really hate a monk, you’ll hate him down to his habit. But you seem to only hate the habit.”

“What are you talking about?” Shiiba muttered.

“Going after the guns only treats the symptoms. Shouldn’t you be going after the guy who holds the gun?” Nagakura sneered.

Shiiba glared at him. “I’m just doing my job. My motives are none of your business.”

“Ah! So it’s none of my business,” Nagakura said. “Poor Yukari. If she could only see her brother cozying up to the men who killed her. Do you think it would make her cry?”

Shiiba felt a violent rage building inside him, but he had to push down his feelings or Nagakura would win.

“Tell me, Shiiba. Who do you really hate?” Nagakura sneered.

“I don’t have time to sit and chat. If you don’t need me, I’m out of here,” Shiiba snapped, turning to leave.

“There’s just no getting through to you!” Nagakura shouted after him. “We’re

on the same team, remember? Or do you prefer Yakuza to detectives? I know where you're headed, you know. Careful you don't get hurt."

"I could say the same to you," Shiiba spat back, and then left the room.

His rage still burned inside him, just as Nagakura had hoped it would. The man had expertly pushed his buttons—and then kept on pushing them.

Shiiba stopped on the sidewalk and tried to cool down. The streets were filled with people on their way home—tired from a hard day at work, yet relieved it was finally over.

The end of the day always left a strange feeling in Shiiba's heart. The sky was dark red, shadows were growing on the sidewalks, and the street lights were flickering on.

Am I the only person in Tokyo without a home?

It had been so different when Shiiba was a child. His kind mother would greet him at the door, wearing her apron. Shiiba thought back to the rest of their small family: his proud older sister, his stern father who deserved respect.

But his father had died when Shiiba was still a teenager, and his mother soon followed. Seven years ago, a stray bullet killed his sister, Yukari, when she got caught in the middle of a gun battle.

Though the death of his parents had been devastating, Shiiba learned to accept his grief, day by day, little by little, until life got back to normal. But his sister's murder crushed a part of his heart forever.

The pointless waste of her life and the life of her unborn child. Yukari had been married less than a year, and had had so much more life ahead of her.

An indescribable rage consumed Shiiba whenever he thought about the past. And no matter how much time passed, his hatred never disappeared.

"Tell me, Shiiba. Who do you really hate?"

Nagakura's words had struck a chord within Shiiba that left him feeling helpless. He couldn't think of anything else.

Shiiba really hated guns. He wanted to totally annihilate the weapons that

had killed Yukari. That was the main reason why he had taken this job.

But pure hatred couldn't always get you through the days. Shiiba also felt a responsibility to his department, which stopped him from walking away from all the pain.

He realized his heart would probably never heal completely. Those white hot flames of anger powered him even now, seven years later.

Why did Yukari have to die so tragically?

Why did her child have to die before it even had a chance to live?

Why did the police let the real gunman go free, and instead prosecute a scapegoat?

Why couldn't society see that the system was corrupt?

Why? Why? Why?

The demons inside him screamed at him. Shiiba wondered if his obsession with guns had made him lose touch with the real world.

He violently shook his head, trying to make the hateful thoughts go away. If he kept thinking about them, he would never be able to go on.

But every time he tried to forget, flames of guilt totally engulfed him, burning him to a crisp on the inside.

Shiiba stepped into the crowd and quickened his pace, like he was trying to catch up with something.

It was already past 10. Shiiba entered the elevator and headed for Munechika's apartment on the top floor.

He turned his key in the lock and went in. The living room was dark and Munechika was nowhere to be seen. The TV had been left on, making the empty room seem very melancholy.

A soft breeze blew in from the balcony window, fluttering the curtains. Shiiba

suddenly saw Munechika on the balcony, gazing out at the spectacular scene. There was a truly amazing view from the 40th floor: Tokyo Tower, the Rainbow Bridge, a whirlpool of dazzling lights.

Shiiba silently watched Munechika for a while. His S had wealth, status, power, everything a man could ever want—yet Munechika still wanted more. People always wanted more.

But seeing him like this, looking down on the city, Shiiba felt there was something tranquil and almost lonely about Munechika. They had slept together countless times, so Shiiba should have felt comfortable around his S by now. But, for some strange reason, Shiiba felt unable to join Munechika on the balcony.

“You came here without me asking. That’s so unlike you,” Munechika suddenly said, not turning around.

Shiiba silently walked over and put his head on Munechika’s broad back.

Shiiba still didn’t apologize for yesterday, though he knew it would smooth things over. He wanted to tell Munechika how he felt, but he still hesitated. It had taken a supreme effort on his part to show up here.

“Something you want to tell me?” Munechika asked quietly.

Shiiba shook his head. Munechika turned around and swept Shiiba’s hair away from his face with his long fingers. Their eyes met for a moment, but Shiiba was the first to look away.

Munechika’s breath tickled Shiiba’s lips as he gave him a gentle kiss. Shiiba hated it when Munechika kissed him like this. It hurt him even more than Munechika’s wild, passionate displays. He felt like a part of his heart was being touched, which unsettled him. Why did he feel so scared when someone showed him affection?

Shiiba pulled away from Munechika and turned around.

“It’s cold. Let’s go inside,” he said.

Shiiba sat on the sofa, while Munechika headed to the kitchen for drinks. As

Shiiba quietly watched, Munechika rolled up his sleeves, found the glasses, took ice from the freezer. Shiiba loved to watch Munechika surreptitiously like this. With a safe distance between them, he could calmly inspect his S.

Long legs. Broad shoulders. Cool eyes. And that was just for starters. Munechika also had unusually long eyelashes, which softened his masculine features. His lips were firm, reflecting his strong will, but they could look amazingly sexy when he parted them. Munechika was such a beautiful man to behold.

Munechika laughed when he saw Shiiba watching him.

“You’re an odd one,” he said, offering Shiiba a drink from a tray.

“What?” Shiiba asked, surprised.



“You come to see me of your own free will,” Munechika said, “and then run away when I touch you. Now you keep gawking at me.”

“Give me a break,” Shiiba muttered.

“I’ll take you to bed right this second,” Munechika teased. He dropped ice into a glass, topped it with bourbon, and then chugged it down. “Have you visited Andou’s grave recently?” he asked.

Shiiba nodded. “Last Saturday.”

“So it was you,” Munechika said. “I was there yesterday. The flowers still looked fresh, so I figured either you or Nishi had been there.”

Andou had been Shiiba’s previous S, his loyal informant for over two years. Last November, the Taiwanese mafia had shot him dead.

Andou had owned shops in Kabukicho, all protected by the Matsukura Group. But he also had a personal relationship with Munechika, and had actually introduced him to Shiiba. The two of them didn’t become friends until after Andou died.

“Remember the gun shop that Andou ran in Ikebukuro?” Munechika said. “It’s still not turning a profit, so Nishi’s shutting it down.”

Shiiba looked sad at the news. The shop specialized in model guns, which was not a popular item these days. But the place had been a valuable source of information for Shiiba, both from gun hobbyists visiting it, and also from the manager’s web page. Now that Andou was dead, Shiiba had no real connection to Nishi, the new owner.

“I’m going to buy it,” Munechika announced.

“Really?” Shiiba gasped.

“Andou just kept the place going for you. Seems wrong to let it go now,” Munechika said warmly.

Shiiba swallowed hard. He had never realized that before.

The image of Munechika at Andou’s grave was still burned in his memory. Munechika had stood in the rain with his head bowed, talking to his old friend like he was still alive. Munechika had mourned Andou’s death as much as Shiiba had, and felt just as guilty that he couldn’t save him. Shiiba’s feelings toward

Munechika had completely changed that day.

Detectives who worked with informants always tried to keep them safe. Shiiba hadn't realized that Andou was in danger, and totally blamed himself for what had happened. The guilt had driven him to offer his body to Munechika, in a desperate attempt to find Andou's killer.

That had been the beginning. A few weeks later, Shiiba's boss ordered him to make Munechika his S. What had started out as work soon turned into a deeper attraction.

Munechika was an S, but he was also a man, and Shiiba wanted, and needed, both sides of him. He knew that mixing business and pleasure was dangerous, but try as he might, he just couldn't seem to stop.

To Shiiba's surprise, Munechika proved to be an excellent S. He delivered sensitive information that would have taken the police force years to uncover.

Shiiba prostituted himself to get the information, but he didn't really care. He could routinely set aside his morals, as long as it led him to the guns. Just deal with it and keep on working, he constantly told himself.

But at some point, a tiny seed of insecurity had taken root inside Shiiba. He knew the reason why. His time with Munechika was becoming more and more intimate.

"Right?" Munechika said, breaking into Shiiba's thoughts. He eyed Shiiba suspiciously and then sighed.

"Uh, sorry, I was thinking. What were you talking about?" Shiiba asked nervously.

"About Nagakura's S. You're meeting with him, right?" Munechika said.

"Yeah," Shiiba confirmed, "but I haven't heard from him yet. He's not the cooperative type."

Munechika frowned and looked like he wanted to say something else.

"What?" Shiiba asked.

"Has he come on to you yet?" Munechika muttered.

Shiiba looked blank, but Munechika persisted. “You said he was being pushed around.”

“You...you idiot!” Shiiba yelled. “Not everybody is sex-crazed like you! Mao is just a kid! Don’t over-think things!”

Munechika snorted and emptied his glass. “Just a kid, eh? He’s Kunugi’s lover, dammit! He probably knows more about sex than you do! You need to be careful.”

Shiiba didn’t care for Munechika’s condescending tone, and poured himself another shot of bourbon.

“I’m not interested, okay?” he finally said. “Mao is too pretty. I’m not into fucking him.”

Munechika suddenly went quiet for a while, carefully considering his next words.

“Are you...a virgin?” he finally asked Shiiba. “I mean, have you ever slept with a woman?”

Shiiba gasped with surprise. “Are you for real, Munechika? How old do you think I am? Don’t be stupid!” he huffed.

“You’re right,” Munechika said. “Of course you’re not a virgin. Sorry I even mentioned it.”

“Just why *did* you mention it?” Shiiba wanted to know.

“Just a wild guess,” Munechika admitted. “You didn’t seem very, uh, experienced to me at first.”

“Of course I didn’t,” Shiiba said, exasperated. “I’m straight, remember? I’m not used to having sex with a guy.”

But Munechika shook his head. “That’s not what I meant. You just seemed sort of, uh, sexually uncomfortable. Maybe you’re not a virgin. But you haven’t had many girlfriends, am I right?”

Shiiba sighed. Munechika had hit the nail on the head. Shiiba had been involved with a number of women, but those relationships never really went

anywhere. He certainly couldn't call any of them "lovers."

"Why? Do you find sex boring?" Munechika asked with interest.

"It's not a physical problem," Shiiba answered. "It's an emotional problem."

He had been bad at relationships since school days. After losing his sister, he had gotten even worse. He asked women out, even slept with some of them, but had never found a girl he could really relax with. He knew it wasn't their problem. It was always him.

"But you must have been crazy about somebody," Munechika persisted. "With that handsome face, the girls probably threw themselves at your feet. You're a real loner, Shiiba."

"I'm not a loner, just bad with people," Shiiba said, looking irritated. "But enough already. I don't need a guidance counselor."

All of a sudden, Shiiba turned white as a sheet.

Munechika frowned at him. "What's wrong now?" he asked.

Shiiba grabbed the remote and turned up the volume. The late news had just begun.

"And today in Shinjuku, police found a dead man inside an abandoned luxury car," the anchorwoman reported. "Yukihiko Kunugi, a member of the Ikkou Society gang, had been shot in the stomach. Authorities believe the murder is gang-related..."

Kunugi is dead.

It had to be the work of the Yagami Group, their attempt to escalate an already-tense situation.

Shiiba turned to Munechika, the remote still in his hand.

"The war has begun."

Munechika kept his eyes on the TV. He didn't reply. It was too dark for Shiiba to read the expression on his face.

Chapter 3

Mao lived only a few minutes from the station, in an elegant mansion divided into several spacious apartments. For someone only in their 20s, the luxury was positively mind-boggling.

Shiiba watched the mansion from a distance for a moment. Two men left the front entrance together. One was a detective from the Shinjuku station. The other man was from COC4.

After the men disappeared, Shiiba stood outside the door and rang Mao's button on the intercom.

"Shibano," Shiiba said, using his other name.

The automatic lock was instantly released. Once inside, he took the elevator to the top floor, and then headed for the back apartment. He rang the bell and the door opened.

"Come in," said Mao Takanashi, looking pale.

Shiiba entered a large living room filled with plants, but not much else. For a young man living on his own, the place was amazingly tidy.

"You don't look well. Are you okay?" Shiiba asked.

"Not really," Mao said quietly. "I couldn't sleep last night. Sit wherever, okay?"

He plopped down on the only sofa. Shiiba sat beside him.

"Some detectives came to see you, right? What did they ask?" Shiiba began.

“When did I last see Kunugi? Was there anything strange about him? Where were the two of us two nights ago?” Mao rattled off. “And on and on and on. Guess they wanted to see if I had an alibi. Do they think I killed him?”

He was right to worry. He was a potential murder suspect.

“They question everyone at first, but if they really suspected you, they would have hauled you down to the station,” Shiiba explained. “They figure this is gang-related, so they sent someone from COC4. Ordinary murders are handled by Investigations, but gang murders are the COC4’s domain.”

Mao looked a little relieved. “Thank God...”

Mao looked even younger than before, his tough façade replaced by a worried look.

According to Section Chief Takasaki, Kunugi had been murdered on the night of the 15th, his body discovered the next day. Nothing else was known yet.

“For some reason, that makes me feel a little better,” Mao said. “But what about you? I told you Kunugi would be better off dead. Did you ever suspect I did it?”

“I did a little, I must admit. Sorry,” Shiiba replied sheepishly, taking out a cigarette. “But Kunugi was shot dead. It must have been a gang dispute.”

“Probably the Yagami Group,” Mao muttered.

“Any other people out to get him besides them?” Shiiba inquired.

“Maybe the Ikkou Society,” Mao guessed. “I’ve heard that there’s a split within the group.”

“Criminal relationships are weak,” Shiiba said. “But this was an important time for the Ikkou Society. The Yagami Group looked for the right moment and then attacked.”

“I guess so. It happens a lot in this life, getting killed by your friends,” Mao said thoughtfully. “But I think the Ikkou Society was involved.”

“Kunugi had lots of Ikkou enemies, but did anyone have a particular grudge against him?” Shiiba asked.

Mao violently shook his head. "I have no idea how he got along with those thugs," he said quickly, turning away.

Shiiba paused for a moment, then posed the question in a different way. "Could you, uh, ask someone else?"

"Why do you keep bugging me about this?" Mao snapped. "Go ask your detective friends."

Shiiba understood how Mao must feel, but he couldn't back down.

"But you're on the inside, Mao," he said gently. "That's different. If the detectives ask, no one will tell them."

Mao calmed down a bit and seemed to be deep in thought.

"Oh, yeah, I just remembered," he said suddenly. "Those cops asked me if I knew where Tahara lived."

"Tahara? Who's he?" Shiiba asked.

"Kunugi's associate, formerly his protégé," Mao answered. "I hear the Ikkou wants him, too. You think that maybe he did it?"

"Was Tahara always with Kunugi?" Shiiba asked.

"Almost always," Mao told him. "He was a real thug. I hated his guts."

Shiiba stubbed out his cigarette in an ash tray. "Mao, what will you do now? Will you stay here?"

Mao had no real job, and could never afford a place like this.

"I dunno," he said with a shrug. "All of Kunugi's stuff belongs to that woman now."

"You mean his girlfriend?" Shiiba said.

Mao nodded. "She works in a Ginza club, a real babe, but super jealous. When I first became Kunugi's lover, she marched in here, grabbed me by the hair, and swung me around the room yelling 'Gangster's bitch! Gangster's bitch!'"

Shiiba raised his eyebrows, but said nothing.

“Kunugi was scared of her, too, so he let her get away with murder,” Mao snorted. “What a dumbass thing to call me, though. She must have heard it on some TV cop show.”

When Mao laughed, he looked like a totally different person. Shiiba was suddenly filled with a strange affection for this poor lost boy.

“Do you have anywhere to go?” Shiiba asked.

Mao shook his head. “But I’ll think of something,” he assured Shiiba.

“Did you call Nagakura?”

Mao looked shocked, and shook his head again. “Nope. He said not to.”

“But maybe he could—” Shiiba started to say.

“Whatever,” Mao interrupted. “Our relationship is now officially over. Since Kunugi’s dead, I’ll have no more information for him.”

He didn’t sound bitter, just defeated.

“I’ll be in contact again,” Shiiba said, getting up to leave. “Sorry for bugging you today.”

Shiiba didn’t like to butt into other people’s affairs, but Mao had no place to go. It was Nagakura’s duty to look after his S, but Shiiba knew it would be a tough sell. He would just have to talk to the other detective and hope for the best.

Mao followed him to the front door.

“You have an unusual way of writing Takanashi,” Shiiba mentioned, making small talk.

“I hate the way my name looks,” Mao complained. “People always ask me how to pronounce it. Wish I had a more ordinary name.”

“Really? But it’s a fine name just as it is,” Shiiba said.

“When the hawk is away, the little birds play,” Mao muttered, looking at the

floor.

“Huh?” Shiiba asked.

“That’s what it means,” Mao explained.

“Taka” meant “hawk,” while “Nashi” meant “without.” But when you read the name on paper, it looked like “little birds play,” a clever name.

Shiiba left the apartment and headed for the station. He had his coat on, though the weather was warm. Spring was already on its way.

He passed several construction sites and vacant lots. Just a few years ago, this area had been filled with traditional old buildings. Now most of them were gone, victims of a mighty tsunami of new development. Buildings were rising out of the ground, looking almost identical to each other.

Suddenly Shiiba’s phone rang. The call was from a phone booth, according to the caller ID. Shiiba picked up and heard Nagakura’s voice.

“What are the police doing?” Nagakura drawled, sounding relaxed.

“Beats me,” Shiiba answered. “COC4 is working on the case.”

“There’s a massive fuss here,” Nagakura continued. “We still don’t know if it was the Yagami Group, and we also don’t know the Ikkou’s next move.”

Nagakura also sounded a little more depressed than usual, and out of breath from smoking too much.

“Some guy named Tahara has gone missing,” Shiiba brought up. “Think it was him?”

“Who knows, though I hear he’s a real wimp,” Nagakura said. “We’ll see, I guess. Anyway, I can’t contact you for a while. See ya.”

“Wait! What about Mao?” Shiiba asked hurriedly.

“What about him?” Nagakura growled, sounding irritated.

“He has nowhere to live now,” Shiiba pointed out. “Aren’t you worried?”

“Like I care,” Nagakura scoffed. “He’s a kid, he can do something else. Now that

Kunugi has gone bye-bye, Mao is absolutely useless to me. His S days are over.”

Nagakura hung up.

Selfish bastard, Shiiba thought, putting his phone back in his pocket.

Just then two sparrows flew over his head. They perched on a utility wire for a few seconds, and then flew away. Shiiba suddenly remembered what Mao had said.

“When the hawk is away, the little birds play.”

If Mao was the pitiful little bird, then who was the hawk? But Shiiba already knew the answer. Actually, two hawks were after Mao: the Yakuza and the police.

Shinozuka opened the door and smiled at Shiiba.

“Ah, glad you came,” he said warmly.

“Sorry to disturb you,” Shiiba apologized.

“You didn’t get lost?” Shinozuka asked as he ushered Shiiba inside.

“No, found it right off. Congratulations on your new home,” Shiiba said, taking a package from under his arm.

Shinozuka looked surprised and pleased.

“It’s a Cassigneul lithograph,” Shiiba explained. “You collect them, right?”

“You remembered!” Shinozuka said happily. “I’ve always loved his work. But wasn’t this expensive?”

“Nah,” Shiiba said. “It’s not signed. But hope you have a spot for it.”

“Thanks. I just moved, so everything is still a bit bare.”

Shiiba felt relieved that Shinozuka liked the gift. He didn’t give many presents, and worried about what to buy.

“Getting settled in?” he asked politely.

“Finally unpacked everything.”

Last month Shinozuka had left the Metropolitan police residence at Hanzoumon and decided to rent his own apartment. This place was a brand-new apartment building in Sendagi, a stone’s throw away from Tokyo University, their alma mater.

Hideyuki Shinozuka had been married to Yukari, Shiiba’s sister. He was also on the police force, currently directing the Planning Unit of the Security Bureau. Though Shinozuka was only 36, he was definitely on track to becoming one of the elites.

“But Asakawa’s here, too,” Shinozuka whispered.

“Mr. Asakawa?” Shiiba echoed.

“Do you mind?” Shinozuka asked nervously.

Shiiba shook his head. He didn’t actually hate the man, but he found Asakawa difficult to deal with.

“My family sent me some crab. I was just about to cook it,” Shinozuka said.

They went into the living room. On the table, a portable stove held a large cooking pot. Asakawa was cheerfully stirring some vegetables. He definitely didn’t look like one of COC4’s best detectives just now.

COC4 specialized in gang violence. Originally it had been Investigations Fourth Unit, but after the police reforms, it was now under Counter-Organized Crime.

“Long time no see, Masaki. Have a seat,” Asakawa said, like it was his own home. It had been two years since Shiiba last saw him, at the seventh anniversary of Yukari’s death.

Asakawa had originally introduced Shinozuka to Yukari, while he was dating Yukari’s friend Masumi. Shinozuka and Yukari instantly hit it off, but their cupid was still single.

“Sorry I haven’t called. Glad you’re well,” Shiiba said.

“Eh, you don’t have to apologize,” Asakawa said, shrugging. “Here, try some

crab. It's delicious."

Asakawa looked like a typical aging bachelor: shaggy, unshaven, wearing an old wrinkled shirt. It was his own fault, but you couldn't help pitying the guy. Underneath all the grunge, he was actually quite handsome. Shiiba couldn't help wondering why he didn't take better care of himself.

"Hey, Shino! Bring us some beer," Asakawa called out.

"I'll get it," Shiiba offered.

But Shinozuka stopped him. "Sit down. You're my guest."

"That's right," Asakawa agreed. "Outside work, who cares if you're career track or not. Right, Shino?"

Shinozuka smiled and opened a can of beer. They had bantered with each other like this since high school, and Asakawa often joked about Shinozuka's success. Asakawa himself was a non-career track officer, far below Shinozuka's status.

Now that they held such wildly different positions, it was assumed that they would naturally grow apart, but the two of them still spent much of their free time together.

"But aren't you too busy to be here, Asakawa? I heard you're on the Kunugi case," Shiiba inquired.

Asakawa looked guilty all of sudden and dropped his chopsticks.

"Let's not ruin our meal," he finally said. "I'm going back to the station later tonight."

Evidently it didn't matter how much the Fourth Division was involved. The case had been left to the Main Office.

"How's the investigation going? Is it a gang dispute?" Shiiba said casually.

"We thought so at first. But it's pretty strange, even for a Yakuza murder," Asakawa said, stirring the pot again.

"Strange?" Shinozuka said.

Asakawa stopped stirring and looked directly at Shiiba. He knew that Shiiba belonged to COC5. COC4 didn't always appreciate COC5's covert operations, and often tried to get in its way. The two groups were sworn enemies.

"Okay, okay, I guess you guys at COC5 can know, too," Asakawa finally said. "Kunugi was shot in another location, then driven away in his own car. The suspect took him to Kamiochiai and left him there."

Asakawa's right. That is definitely strange, Shiiba thought.

Suspects usually destroyed evidence to get the police off their trail. But that wouldn't have been necessary if the Yagami Group were at fault. They would want to show their handiwork to the world. On the other hand, if the murderer had really wanted to cover his tracks, he could have pushed the car into the sea or buried the body in the mountains.

"It doesn't fit," Shinozuka said.

"Nope," Asakawa agreed. "I've met the Yagami Group's president, but he's very secretive. I asked him to hand over the culprit, but his group doesn't want to start a war. The group has been using the power of the Kansai groups to make demands on the Ikkou Society. A war would cost them too much, even if they won. They really didn't want this to happen."

"I heard that one of Kunugi's men is missing. Does he have something to do with it?" Shiiba asked, desperate to know more. He looked at Asakawa with fierce eyes.

"Hey, who told you that? One of our detectives?" Asakawa demanded.

"No. One of my colleagues," Shiiba admitted. "He's infiltrated the Ikkou Society."

Asakawa still looked suspicious.

"I'll be honest with you, Masaki," he said bluntly. "There's a fine balance between the gangs and COC4. But when you COC5 guys work in the shadows, it destroys that balance. Face it, taking guns away from the Yakuza is a waste of time. They'll just find more."

Shiiba understood Asakawa's point, but had his own opinions on the matter.

"You just scratched each other's backs," he protested. "That cozy relationship got too corrupt, so we had to restructure everything. Besides, the Fourth Division was not that great at seizing firearms. The Anti-Guns Unit was necessary."

The Anti-Gun's role had previously been part of the Community Safety and Public Security departments, but was now under COC5. The Unit's role now also encroached on what used to belong to the Fourth Division.

"It was impossible to investigate firearms when the Fourth Division was so tight with the gangs," Shiiba explained.

"What? Say that again..." Asakawa trailed off, glaring at Shiiba. You could cut the tension with a knife.

"Hey, we're supposed to be eating here. Asakawa, your glass is empty," Shinozuka said firmly, picking up a can.

"Sorry," Shiiba muttered, bowing his head.

"Don't apologize. Asakawa started it," Shinozuka said.

Asakawa scowled and drank his beer, but Shiiba wasn't finished with him yet.

"So his associate went missing, eh?" Shiiba continued to probe. "How does that relate to the murder?"

"Jeez! Let a guy eat, wouldja?" Asakawa griped. But he put down his chopsticks again and glared at Shiiba. "Masaki, this is off the record," he warned. "Don't blab this to anybody in COC5."

"I promise," Shiiba said with a firm nod.

"Right before Kunugi died, he went out drinking with this Tahara at the Ginza club where his girlfriend worked. Tahara had been Kunugi's loyal pet for a long time. They left together around 11:00 p.m. Who knows what happened afterward, but at two, Kunugi was dead."

Shinozuka nodded. "So at this stage, Tahara is the prime suspect?" he asked.

“We have no evidence yet, but it seems likely,” Asakawa replied. “But why did he leave the body and take off? A Yakuza doesn’t kill his boss. Now the police and his gang are both hunting him down. If he wanted to escape, he could have buried Kunugi and bought himself some time.”

“Maybe somebody else killed Kunugi, and Tahara, too,” Shiiba said thoughtfully.

“It’s possible,” Shinozuka mused, frowning.

“But if the killer murdered them both, where’s Tahara’s body? Why would he bother to separate them?” Asakawa grunted.

He shoveled more crab into his mouth and took another slug of beer before he continued. “Maybe Tahara did kill Kunugi and got away. We won’t know until we find him. But it could have been the Yagami Group, another gang, someone else in the Ikkou Society—the possibilities are endless! We’ll just have to investigate all of them.”

Asakawa shrugged his shoulders. He was tired of talking about it now.

Shiiba stood up to leave at 10, followed by Asakawa.

“Masaki, thanks for coming today. And thank you for the present, too,” Shinozuka said warmly.

“Glad you liked it,” Shiiba said. “Thanks for the food.”

Shinozuka followed them to the entrance to see them off, then went back inside. Shiiba and Asakawa walked to the station together. Shiiba felt uncomfortable and a little nervous being alone with Asakawa like this. They walked in silence until Asakawa finally broke the ice.

“Weird, isn’t it,” he said.

“Huh?”

“Shinozuka threw his old furniture away,” Asakawa clarified.

Shiiba had noticed that himself. Shinozuka’s last apartment had been large

enough for a family, so he had left a lot behind, including some wedding gifts.

“Well, guess he had to. His new place is too small,” Shiiba said sadly.

Shinozuka’s last apartment had been filled with Yukari’s presence. The flowery curtains she had chosen. Her handmade pillow covers. The knitted afghan on the sofa. Now all that was gone.

How could Shinozuka just throw everything away? It was like throwing away their memories of Yukari.

“I hope he’ll get married again,” Asakawa suddenly said.

Shiiba looked at Asakawa with surprise. Asakawa gave him a sympathetic look.

“It would probably be strange for you, but I think it would be good for him,” Asakawa said quietly.

“I really liked your sister, Masaki. She was a good girl, that’s why I introduced her to Shino. But Yukari died almost nine years ago. Shino needs to move on and make a new family.”

In his heart, Shiiba knew Asakawa was right, but he still couldn’t accept it. How could Shinozuka marry someone who wasn’t his sister? How could Shinozuka ever love someone else? Shiiba knew that Shinozuka needed to move on, but he wanted him to love only Yukari forever.

“You went to Shinozuka’s house for New Year, right?” Asakawa said. “After you left he phoned to tell me. He was so happy that you came over.”

Since Yukari’s death, the brothers-in-law had been more like strangers. Shiiba had closed his heart to Shinozuka and kept his distance.

Truth be told, Shiiba had been disappointed in Shinozuka. The investigation into Yukari’s murder had been mishandled, or so Shiiba believed. But Shinozuka just accepted the official police verdict without question, and Shiiba figured he was trying to protect himself.

Shiiba’s life had changed dramatically since then. He passed the first-class civil service examination and took a job in the Metropolitan, but then quit to

take the police exam. Soon afterward, he joined the non-career track officers. Now he and Shinozuka were in the same organization, though on completely different paths.

Shiiba still despised the system that had failed him so miserably, but had long forgiven Shinozuka for not raising more of a fuss about the case.

“Shinozuka has seemed happier since New Year,” Asakawa said. “Though he’s working harder than ever. He needs a good woman by his side to help him. Right, Masaki? If he wants to remarry, will you support him? If you don’t, he probably wouldn’t go through with anything.”

Asakawa only wanted Shinozuka to be happy. Shiiba knew that. But he stared long into the night before he answered.

“I’ll support him,” he finally said. “He deserves to be happy.”

“Sorry for bringing this all up, and sorry I got so angry before,” Asakawa said sincerely, glancing at Shiiba. “You hit one of my raw spots.”

“A raw spot?” Shiiba echoed.

“The thing is, I finally found a Yakuza that we’ve been hunting for a long time,” Asakawa admitted. “He killed his girlfriend and ran. Just as he was about to turn himself in, those COC5 idiots stuck their necks out. Our suspect took off and we haven’t seen him since.”

Shiiba suddenly felt sick to his stomach. Some COC units acted alone and worked against each other. Maybe if they had better communication between departments, they wouldn’t stomp on each other’s toes so often.

“Did I say too much?” Asakawa asked, when Shiiba didn’t reply.

“It’s fine,” Shiiba assured him. “What you said is true. Some divisions get too close to the gangs, even go out drinking with them. But we need to connect with the Yakuza somehow to get the info we need. They won’t come right out and tell us, even if we ask nicely.”

Shiiba knew that working in COC4 wasn’t easy, but he didn’t feel the need to say anything more. Asakawa, however, still wanted to talk.

“You said that one of your men had infiltrated the Ikkou Society, which one?” he asked.

“The investigation is still in progress. I can’t tell you,” Shiiba replied automatically.

“C’mon, Masaki!” Asakawa wheedled. “We don’t even know what COC5 does. Dealing with the Ikkou is tough enough, if we get it wrong, all hell could break loose. So who is it?”

Shiiba let out a long sigh before he answered.

“It’s Nagakura,” he muttered.

“Nagakura? Kousuke Nagakura?” Asakawa gasped.

“Do you know him?” Shiiba asked.

“We were in the same station together two years ago,” Asakawa told Shiiba. “We lived in the same dorms. He became a detective the year after me, I think, and was transferred to the head office. Amazing man...”

It wasn’t easy to become a detective. Not only did you have to be smart, you also had to get along with your superiors.

“Surprising that he’s still in the head office,” Asakawa went on. “I figured he wouldn’t like it and move on...”

“What do you mean?” Shiiba asked with interest.

Asakawa gaped at him. “Aw, c’mon now! You never heard the rumors about him?”

“No one tells me gossip,” Shiiba admitted.

Asakawa frowned. “Tragic. Well, a long time ago, Nagakura was a real trailblazer in the Metropolitan’s new Arms Division. He was the first one to really use the S method. They say he had excellent results with a female S, but when the gangs found out, they killed her. I don’t know much more than that.”

As another detective with an S, the news hit Shiiba hard.

“You know Munechika of the Matsukura Group, right?” Asakawa suddenly

blurted out.

Shiiba hadn't expected this question and found himself speechless for a moment.

"Answer me," Asakawa persisted.

"Why do you think I know him?" Shiiba asked slowly.

"I've been looking at our files on him," Asakawa said. "There's a guy who looks like you in some of the pictures. One photo shows him going into Munechika's place at Roppongi Hills. It was out of focus, but I could still tell it was you. Is Munechika your informant?"

An organization like the Matsukura Group would always interest the police. Shiiba knew the Fourth Division took pictures of people coming and going from gang offices. But Munechika wasn't really a gang member, only one of their official business partners.

"I work with him sometimes," Shiiba admitted.

Asakawa looked pained. "Such a complicated guy..."

"Munechika respects the Matsukura Group, but he's not really in bed with them," Shiiba said. "Why would you watch him?"

"We keep tabs on him 24/7, actually," Asakawa confessed. "Munechika seems to be an important player in the Matsukura Group. We also suspect he could be a spy, receiving orders from the Kantou Kyouwa Society."

The Kantou Kyouwa Society was a mediating organization that included most of the major groups in the Kantou region. It was a big player in the Yakuza world.

"Mediation? How is Munechika involved with that?" Shiiba asked.

"The details are sketchy, but we think he might be gathering intelligence on international mafia groups," Asakawa revealed. "The foreign crime gangs have been getting pretty highhanded lately. He probably wants to know how they operate."

It made perfect sense to Shiiba that Munechika would be involved with

Kantou Kyouwa Society. Last year when Shiiba made contact with a Chinese gun broker, Munechika had suddenly appeared.

“My superiors want me to keep an eye on him,” Munechika had told Shiiba at that time. Shiiba thought he had been referring to the Matsukura Group, not the Kantou Kyouwa Society.

“Munechika is never completely out in the open,” Asakawa warned. “We don’t know what he does in the shadows.”

Shiiba violently shook his head.

“But Keigo Munechika is my S! He’s registered with the Metropolitan,” he protested, not wanting to believe the news.

Asakawa opened his eyes wide, and then sighed.

“If things go badly this could affect your career,” he said quietly.

Shiiba didn’t have an answer to that.

“Shino’s worried about you, too,” Asakawa went on. “He considers you his younger brother.”

“Have you told Shinozuka I’ve been meeting with Munechika?” Shiiba gasped.

“No!” Asakawa shot back, looking upset. “But I don’t have to tell him. He can instantly know your whereabouts.”

Shinozuka’s job in the Security Bureau gave him a wide access to detectives who specialized in phone tapping, photography, and other illegal investigation methods.

The Security Bureau’s ability to collect information was absolutely amazing. Shiiba had first been trained in intelligence at the head office. That training had two main goals: to teach him about guns and the art of covert investigation. His teachers were experts in infiltration and S work, and Shiiba soon discovered exactly how powerful the Security Bureau was. Some of his classmates received even more intensive training, and then were dispatched to Public Security bureaus across the country.

The Public Security bureaus in each prefecture covertly monitored potentially dangerous groups, such as Communists and neo-Nazis. They were employed by the prefecture, but took their orders from the Metropolitan Police, which was part of the government. The rights they exercised surpassed those laid down in law.

Shinozuka was at the very top of this elite group.

“Even if he knew what you were doing, he probably wouldn’t pay attention,” Asakawa conceded. “He knows what it’s like to work with gangs.”

Asakawa knew the pain Shinozuka was in after Yukari’s murder, the pain he had to hide to keep working within the system.

Though Shiiba had turned his back on Shinozuka, his brother-in-law had been watching out for him from a distance. No matter what Shiiba did, Shinozuka had always been there for him. It had been a long seven years, but Shiiba felt they could finally put the past behind them.

There was a dark anxiety in Shiiba’s heart though. What if Shinozuka discovered his fatal secret, that Shiiba was prostituting himself to get information?

Shiiba didn’t even want to think about it. Why did he feel so afraid? He had been so happy when Munechika became his S. Maybe too happy. Was he about to lose everything?

Chapter 4

Shiiba stood outside in the cold, waiting to see Mao. Soon Mao came out of his building, wearing a parka and a woolly hat. With both hands thrust in his pockets, he could be any happy-go-lucky kid walking down the street. Mao could be going to college, or his job, or even on a date with his girlfriend. Just a guy enjoying life.

Shiiba had heard nothing from Nagakura. With their kingpin dead, things were probably in chaos at the Ikkou Society. If Kunugi really was the only person who knew about the weapons, the other members of the group would be desperately looking for them.

Earlier that day, Shiiba had met with one of his informants. Then, worried about Mao, he'd decided to check up on him. He didn't plan to follow him, but did so anyway.

Mao strolled down the residential street, then paused on a small bridge over the Kanda River to watch the water go by. It was the boundary between Shinjuku, Nagano, and Shibuya.

When Mao didn't move on, Shiiba decided to approach him.

"Mao," he said in a low voice.

Mao turned to look.

"Oh, it's you," he said softly, looking like he had just awakened from a dream.

"What are you doing?" Shiiba asked.

"Nothing," Mao said, turning to the river again.

Shiiba stood next to him and looked down at the water. Under the bridge, some ducks splashed in the water.

“Looking at the ducks?” Shiiba asked, trying to make conversation.

Mao shrugged. “Not really. I just like this scene. I often come here on my own. It’s like another world.”

Shiiba looked east and saw the high rises of Shinjuku in the distance. Mao was right, this was an unusual spot. It felt like they were standing behind the city somehow.

“Kunugi’s woman told me I have to be out of the apartment by tomorrow,” Mao said.

“Where are you going? Do you have another place to stay?” Shiiba asked.

“Maybe with a friend,” Mao replied. “I used to sell my body to him.”

Shiiba nodded. So Mao had sold his body to men. A client could go to a club and choose a boy he liked, or have one sent to his hotel. Many boys sold themselves without the help of a pimp, but the police rarely cracked down on them. Japan’s current prostitution laws applied only to heterosexual sex.

“Did you need money at that time?” Shiiba asked.

Mao nodded. “My dad was a scumbag gambler and alcoholic. My mom worked hard, but she died of cancer when I was in elementary school. By the time I got to high school, my father didn’t even work anymore, but he still blew money in casinos...”

Shiiba silently listened to Mao’s story as he watched the setting sun.

“Then I met Kunugi. The manager at the bar where I worked introduced us. Kunugi never liked the scruffy type. He went in for boyish men, so I was perfect. I knew he was a Yakuza, but I didn’t want to walk the streets looking for public toilets. Kunugi liked me, and soon I slept only with him.”

Mao paused to take a deep breath, and then continued.

“Pretty soon after that, my father went to the hospital with a messed-up liver. He died three months later. My father had been such an asshole, none of

his relatives even shed a tear. Anyway, in the middle of the funeral, some Yakuza showed up. Turns out he owed them money. The relatives got scared and took off, but I really didn't care."

"How much was the debt?" Shiiba asked.

"Who knows?" Mao said. "But Kunugi paid it all off."

"You could have gone to the courts," Shiiba told him. "You wouldn't have been responsible for your father's debt."

"Yeah, I heard something like that," Mao said. He took out a cigarette and twirled it between his fingers. "It was a gambling debt though, so there wasn't a receipt. Yakuza don't stop until they get the money, you know that. Anyway, Kunugi took care of the debt because he didn't want other Yakuza after me. But he never once said that I had to pay him back with my body. I wanted to be his lover."

Shiiba didn't agree with Mao's conclusion. Kunugi had taken advantage of Mao, pure and simple.

"I hated Kunugi, but I was still grateful to him," Mao insisted. "He rented that apartment for me when I had nowhere else to go. I had no real place to call home, but you probably don't understand how that feels."

No home. Shiiba definitely understood the feeling, though there had always been people who cared for him. But no matter where he went, he always felt vaguely uncomfortable.

Not this place. This doesn't feel like home.

That lonely feeling was always at the back of his mind.

"Mao, why don't stay at my place for a while?" Shiiba offered. "It's not big, but you'd have a place to sleep. You can stay as long as you like until you find something."

Mao looked at him in surprise. Shiiba had actually surprised himself by making the suggestion.

"What?" Mao gasped. "You care? But I hate the police."

“I’m not speaking as a police officer,” Shiiba said. “This has nothing to do with my work.”

Truth be told, Shiiba didn’t really understand why he cared so much about what happened to Mao. Maybe, as an S detective, he felt responsible for him somehow. But did it really matter why? He couldn’t leave Mao stranded.

“Just stay tonight,” Shiiba suggested. “You can leave tomorrow. Surely you can manage one night in a police officer’s home?”

Mao smiled at this. “You’re a real weirdo, you know? But, thanks, I’ll stay.”

Shiiba wondered what Mao was really thinking.

Was he just trying to please him? Maybe, but so what? Mao might never find a real home, but at least tonight he’d be off the streets.



They went back to Mao's apartment for his stuff. Mao shoved a few clothes into a small suitcase, and then headed for the door.

"Sorry to make you wait," he apologized.

"That's all you need?" Shiiba asked with disbelief.

"Yeah. Kunugi's woman will sort out the rest."

"You should take more," Shiiba urged. "I'll help you carry it."

"This is fine," Mao insisted. "Kunugi bought just about everything here, you know."

Mao didn't want anything that Kunugi had paid for.

Shiiba looked sadly at Mao. Such a small, tragic little suitcase. He grabbed it from Mao's hand.

"I'll carry it."

Even homeless men had more possessions. Mao was going out into the world with only a tiny bag to his name.

"You must be hungry," Shiiba suddenly said.

"What do you want to eat?"

"Anything's fine. I'm not picky," Mao said, and shrugged.

As they left the apartment building, a low voice called out from behind, "Hey, Mao."

A man dressed as a Yakuza stood in the fading light of the sun. Nearby, two other men leaned against a sedan.

"Mr. Kadota," Mao said quietly.

"It's been a while, Mao. Where are you going with that bag?" Kadota asked menacingly. He had short hair and seemed to be in his late 40s.

"Ms. Harumi said I had to leave by tomorrow, so I..." Mao trailed off.

"Ms. Harumi, huh? Seems to me, you're running away," Kadota snorted.

“What do you mean?” Mao asked nervously.

“Tell the truth, Mao,” Kadota growled. “You’re meeting Tahara, right? We know what you both did.”

Mao held his breath.

“We saw Tahara’s girlfriend,” Kadota continued. “She said they broke up. Wanna know why? Tahara was a homo. He slept with some young boy. Guess what his name was? Mao. Just like you. Some coincidence, huh?”

So Mao had slept with Tahara. That was why Nagakura had threatened him. Kunugi would have never forgiven Mao. He might have even killed him.

“I slept with Tahara. So what?” Mao spat out. “Mr. Kunugi is dead. I can’t apologize to him now.”

Kadota gave him a cruel smile. “Who’s asking for an apology? Did Tahara kill Kunugi, Mao? Maybe Mr. Kunugi found out about your affair. Tahara killed Kunugi before Kunugi killed him. Makes perfect sense. Tell us where Tahara is.”

“I-I don’t know,” Mao stammered. “I have no idea...”

“He must have contacted you,” Kadota said. “Well, come with us now. If you tell us where Tahara is hiding out, we’ll let you go without a scratch.”

Kadota winked at the two men near the car. They hurried forward and grabbed Mao’s arms.

“No! Let me go!” Mao protested, trying to get away.

As the men pushed Mao into the car, Shiiba yelled at them to stop.

“Get off him. He doesn’t want to go with you,” he growled.

“So you’re Mao’s friend, eh?” Kadota said. “Better take off, pal. This is your first and last warning.”

“I can’t go home. I’m...I’m his lover,” Shiiba choked out.

Kadota looked shocked at first, and then burst out laughing. “Jesus, Mao! A new boyfriend already? You homos have absolutely no morals...”

Suddenly Shiiba kicked him in the gut. Kadota instantly collapsed to the sidewalk.

“Mao, run!” Shiiba screamed, as another man lunged at him.

Shiiba hit him in the face with Mao’s bag and then punched his stomach.

“Mao! Let’s get out of here!” Shiiba screamed again.

Mao looked absolutely terrified. Shiiba grabbed his hand and dragged him away.

“Get back here!” Kadota screamed.

Shiiba quickly glanced back. Kadota was still on the ground, but the other thugs were dashing toward them.

Suddenly a taxi approached. Shiiba ran into the street and flagged it down.

“Get in!” he yelled, pushing Mao into the back seat. Shiiba jumped in after him and slammed the door. Just then Kadota’s men ran up and started banging on the car.

“Go!” Shiiba screeched.

The terrified driver slammed on the accelerator.

Mao was gasping for breath. Shiiba reached over and grabbed his hand again.

“Wh-where are you going...?” the driver asked nervously.

“Setagaya,” Shiiba said.

“This place isn’t a refugee center, you know,” Munechika said coldly. He was in the kitchen with Shiiba while Mao waited in the living room.

“Sorry,” Shiiba apologized, “but it’s just for a little while. The kid needs a place to crash. My house isn’t safe.”

From a security-issue point of view, Munechika’s apartment in Roppongi Hills was a much better choice. With a guard at the entrance, the thugs just couldn’t walk in off the street.

“But he’s not even your S, remember? You’re too soft-hearted, Shiiba,” Munechika muttered.

He’s probably right, Shiiba thought.

But why should it matter? The police had a duty to protect their informants, though Shiiba’s superiors might disagree. Protecting an S was a detective’s personal decision, because once an S became useless, the department didn’t really care what happened to him.

Officially, an S was nothing more than a valuable informant. If an S got in trouble with a gang, the police remained unconcerned. That was the cold, hard truth of the matter.

“But that boy screwed Tahara!” Munechika hissed. “He must have known what would happen when Kunugi found out. Can’t the cops protect him?”

“Maybe. I’ll find out what he knows and make my report,” Shiiba promised.

Munechika kept quiet, but looked unhappy. “I’m taking a shower,” he grunted, leaving the room.

Shiiba returned to the living room, where Mao sat patiently on the sofa.

“Is that guy a Yakuza?” Mao asked bluntly.

He definitely knew the type. Though Munechika looked like a businessman to ordinary people, Mao sensed something much darker about him.

“Kind of,” Shiiba said vaguely. “He’s a friend, though. I asked him to let you stay. You can hide here.”

“Sorry to cause so much trouble,” Mao apologized.

“No problem,” Shiiba said.

He sat down next to Mao and turned to face him.

“Can you tell me more about what happened back there?” Shiiba asked.

“You mean Tahara?” Mao asked, then shrugged. “It’s true, I was sleeping with him. I was just fooling around, but Tahara started to get serious about me. Who knows, maybe he did kill Kunugi. But believe me, if I knew where the guns

were, I'd tell those thugs so they'd leave me alone. I just want a peaceful life."

Mao sounded like he was telling the truth, but Shiiba still had his doubts.

Why can't Japan have a witness protection program? he thought angrily.

Then informants like Mao wouldn't have to live in fear. They could change their names, move away, live their lives as a different person. Everything could be changed: social security numbers, driver's licenses, even their birth certificates.

In Japan, anyone who cooperated with the police risked their own necks. The system made a mockery of honest people. If Mao was actually lying, Shiiba didn't blame him one bit.

Shiiba decided to back off for a while and show Mao around the apartment. Mao's room had a TV and an adjoining bathroom, so Mao could relax and stay out of Munechika's way. Shiiba had already bought dinner for them. He left Mao inside and went back to the living room.

Munechika finished his shower and entered the living room in a robe.

"Shiiba, does that Kadota guy work for the Ikkou?" Munechika asked thoughtfully, taking a beer from the fridge.

"I have no idea," Shiiba answered. "Does the whole Ikkou Society think Tahara killed Kunugi, or just Kadota? What gives with the Ikkou and the Yagami Group right now?"

"There is still tension between them," Munechika said. "But the Ikkou is waiting to make a move until it finds out who killed Kunugi. If Tahara did, maybe war can be avoided."

The Ikkou Group could then patch up the organization and pick a successor.

"What are you going to do now?" Munechika asked.

"Can I stay here tonight?" Shiiba requested. "I don't want to leave him alone."

"My, aren't you kind!" Munechika teased. "Do you like him? He is very pretty."

Shiiba grimaced. "It's not like that, okay? Do you really think I have feelings for that kid?"

"No," Munechika grumbled. "You two would look like princesses together. More like lesbian than gay."

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that. Stop being weird," Shiiba snapped.

Munechika's eyes narrowed. "Give me a break. He'll be bored without a partner. It won't be long before..." Suddenly he glared at Shiiba. "Hey, what about us tonight?" he demanded.

"I can't," Shiiba said quickly.

Munechika's face clouded over. "Are you trying to starve me to death?" he complained, stroking Shiiba's cheek. He traced his finger down Shiiba's neck to his collarbone.

Shiiba instantly felt aroused, but shook away Munechika's hand. "Not tonight," he insisted. "Mao is here."

"Oh, please!" Munechika scoffed. "He knows what men do to each other. We won't be corrupting an innocent mind."

"That's not the problem," Shiiba hissed.

"What *is* the problem then?" Munechika huffed. "I keep feeding you information, remember?"

"Only stuff that's not important," Shiiba snorted.

"So? Information is information. I'm your pet dog, Shiiba. You should look after me."

Munechika's tone sounded mocking, but Shiiba knew he wasn't amused. Munechika just didn't want to sleep with Shiiba. He wanted a commitment from him.

Every time they slept together, Shiiba's angst and confusion increased. Though he seemed happy on the outside, he constantly worried about how much longer he could keep up this façade.

The very first time he'd slept with Munechika, Shiiba vowed to never betray his S. He wasn't lying. He would honor his promise, no matter what happened.

So what was he afraid of? Shiiba couldn't figure out why he felt so anxious. If he rejected Munechika because of these vague feelings, their relationship would end.

"Okay. Do whatever you want," Shiiba muttered.

But Munechika didn't make a move. Shiiba glanced at him. His S looked pale, like he'd been holding his breath.

"I don't want to, if you don't want to," Munechika said softly. "I love to slowly turn a man to jelly. But when you look at me like that, I quickly lose interest. Do you really think I'm sex-crazed, Shiiba? Be honest with me."

"Munechika, I..."

"Go home. Forget about the kid. Come back tomorrow," Munechika said. He went into his room without looking back.

Shiiba stood up and headed for the guest room. He was about to knock on the door, when he heard a cell phone ring. Shiiba listened through the door.

"Where are you? Are you all right? Huh? The police? I dunno. Yeah, I got it okay. When can I see you? I miss you..." Mao's voice was gentle. He was probably talking to Tahara.

Shiiba could tell that Mao really liked the guy. He wasn't just "fooling around."

But what Shiiba heard next totally amazed him.

"Are you really okay, Nagakura? I'll die if something happens to you! Nagakura? Nagakura, wait!"

So he hung up on him, Shiiba thought. He could hear Mao sobbing behind the door. What was going on? Did Mao actually like Nagakura?

Shiiba knocked. No answer. He opened the door.

Mao was sitting on the bed. He looked up with surprise and stashed his cell

phone under the blanket.

“Was that Nagakura on the phone?” Shiiba asked calmly.

“What? You were eavesdropping on me?” Mao wiped the tears from his face and glared at Shiiba.



“Sorry, it was an accident. I came to say good-bye and heard you talking.”
Shiiba sat on the bed, searching for the right words to say. He should have

known that Mao and Nagakura were lovers. “So you, uh, like Nagakura, huh?” he said casually.

“What if I do?” Mao asked defiantly. “It’s none of your business.”

“How does Nagakura feel? Does he like you, too?” Shiiba asked.

“No way. He’s a homophobe, remember?” Mao spat out.

Unrequited love, the cruelest emotion. Shiiba had never been in love himself, but he definitely knew that much.

“But how can you love someone who treats you so badly?” Shiiba asked.

Mao just laughed. “You’ve never been in love, have you? Sometimes it doesn’t matter if he hates you. Nagakura’s a real bastard, but I love him. I can’t help it...”

Mao buried his face in his knees and started crying again. After a few minutes, he looked up and wiped his face with his sleeve.

“I wonder why myself,” he admitted. “How could I fall for such a jerk? I may be stupid, but I’m not a masochist. You know what I mean?”

“When did you...?” Shiiba began.

“I don’t know,” Mao said. “In the beginning, he made me wanna puke. But after I got to know him, I saw how lonely he was. I got used to his cruelty. Before I knew it, I’d fallen in love. But I can’t tell him about it, because he’d just hit me.”

The Stockholm Syndrome, Shiiba thought.

It was a phenomenon that sometimes occurred in hostage situations. The victim began to like, or even love, his captor. Mao had endured Nagakura’s psychological attacks for a long time, and eventually grew to depend on him.

Shiiba stopped the interrogation. There was no point in analyzing Mao’s feelings. Whether it was love or something stranger, Mao seemed sure about his feelings.

“I’m leaving now. I’ll come again tomorrow,” Shiiba said.

Mao looked like he wanted to say something.

“Something wrong?” Shiiba asked.

“Is your real name Shiiba?”

Munechika had called Shiiba by his real name, so Mao knew that Shibano was an alias. Shiiba nodded.

“I thought it was you,” Mao muttered.

“What?” Shiiba prompted.

“Nagakura once said that I reminded him of Shiiba, one of his colleagues. Not just my looks, but everything. He said the Yakuza killed your sister...”

Shiiba didn’t know why Nagakura would have mentioned him, but he didn’t really care. Though he wasn’t on a career track, he was no ordinary cop. His brother-in-law was a supervisor. His sister had been killed by a Yakuza.

“It’s true,” he said. “My sister got caught up in a gang fight. A stray bullet killed her.”

“Did the shooter really get away with it?” Mao asked. “I heard they locked up a scapegoat instead. The gang president’s son really shot her...”

“The gang made a deal,” Shiiba said flatly. “If the police arrested another man, the group would end the war. The police caved in. I was in college then, so there was nothing I could do.”

“What would you do if you met the real killer?” Mao asked surprisingly.

Shiiba had asked himself the same question a hundred times. If the shooter regretted his actions, maybe Shiiba could forgive him. But what if the guy didn’t give a crap? Maybe Shiiba would kill him himself. He just didn’t know.

Shiiba knew that police officers shouldn’t have those thoughts, but he told Mao the truth. “I would either forgive him, or kill him. I won’t know until it happens,” he said vaguely.

“Definitely,” Mao agreed. “You won’t know until it happens.”

“Did you call Nagakura by his real name from the beginning?” Shiiba suddenly

asked.

“Yeah,” Mao said, then asked, “Is that strange?”

“Most undercover detectives use a false identity,” Shiiba revealed.

“Guess he didn’t bother with a kid like me,” Mao mused.

Shiiba stood up to leave. Mao followed him.

As Shiiba left the room, Mao whispered through the crack in the door, “Nagakura said I was like you. But I don’t think I am. You’re more like Nagakura.”

“Me?” Shiiba gasped, surprised at being compared to such a cruel man. “I don’t think so.”

“But you are,” Mao insisted. “You both hate the police, but still work as detectives.”

Shiiba had no good answer to that.

“Good night,” Mao whispered, closing the door.

Shiiba stared at the door for a long time. Mao had really opened his eyes.

Shiiba hated the police. He couldn’t deny that. He despised what he had to do and the world he had to live in. But even though he hated the organization, he loved the power it gave him over criminals. There was no real conviction in his choice. Only hate.

Chapter 5

The next day Shiiba had a phone call from Nagakura.

“The usual place,” Nagakura said, meaning the hotel.

Shiiba gasped when Nagakura opened the door. Nagakura looked even more tired than before, and the lines on his forehead had deepened. He had dark shadows under his eyes and his skin looked pasty. The life of an undercover detective infiltrating a gang had always been tough, but now a gang war was threatening to break out soon.

“You don’t look well,” Shiiba said with concern.

“Same as always. I have a bad liver,” Nagakura said, rolling over on the bed. He didn’t seem to be drinking today.

“What’s happening with the Ikkou?” Shiiba asked.

“They still can’t decide,” Nagakura answered. “Kunugi ran the whole group by himself, you know. They’re trying to locate the guns, but no luck yet.”

“A man named Kadota tried to kidnap Mao,” Shiiba said.

Nagakura glanced at Shiiba for a second, but then looked back at the ceiling.

“Whatever,” he said in a bored tone.

“Aren’t you worried?” Shiiba snapped. “They think that Tahara killed Kunugi. They also think that Mao knows where the weapons are, since he was sleeping with Tahara. That’s why they tried to grab him.”

“But they didn’t, did they?” Nagakura pointed out. “So it’s okay. Is Mao with

you now?”

“He’s hiding at Munechika’s apartment.”

Nagakura suddenly sat up and grinned. “Amazing! How do you do it, Shiiba? How do you manipulate Munechika? Don’t tell me you seduced him?”

Shiiba was speechless, though he wanted to call him an idiot.

Nagakura pushed on. “C’mon, ‘fess up. You used your body to reel him in.”

“Shut the fuck up. Who are you to talk?” Shiiba muttered.

Nagakura whistled. “Did you do the same thing with your last S? Andou?”

Shiiba knew there was no point in denying it, so he shut up.

Nagakura snorted at him. “That’s why you sympathize with Mao. You cocksuckers understand each other.”

Suddenly Nagakura pulled Shiiba onto the bed. “I won’t call you the ace detective anymore. You’re the man eater.”

“GET OFF ME!” Shiiba yelled.

With both hands pinned behind him, Shiiba couldn’t move away.

Nagakura quickly crawled on top of him. “C’mon, Shiiba. Suck me. With all your experience, you must give amazing head. Will you suck me?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Shiiba yelled. “Stick it in my mouth and I’ll bite it off.”

He tried to push Nagakura away, but Nagakura just tightened his grip. Shiiba moaned in pain.

“C’mon, relax.” Nagakura laughed, unzipping Shiiba’s pants.

“Get off. Don’t touch me,” Shiiba demanded, swinging his head from side to side.

Nagakura ignored him completely. He wriggled his hand inside Shiiba’s pants and grabbed his penis. “I’ll make you behave,” he whispered. “Maybe it’s because I’m tired, but I’m really horny today. You’re a man, you know how it feels.”

"If you need it that bad, jerk yourself off," Shiiba retorted.

"I'd rather put it in you," Nagakura teased. "Just visualizing you spread-eagled before a Yakuza really turns me on. I want to know exactly what that feels like."

To his horror, Shiiba felt himself getting hard. He realized that Nagakura could enter him at any moment. Shiiba's breathing grew more frantic.

"C'mon, fuck me," Nagakura urged. "It would feel so good. You don't have to pretend with me."

As Nagakura nibbled on Shiiba's earlobe, Shiiba felt waves of passion building up inside him. How could a horrible man like Nagakura turn him on? Just the thought of it made Shiiba want to kill himself, until he had a sudden realization.

"You're gay, aren't you?" Shiiba said quietly. "You're only homophobic because you're afraid of who you really are."

"Who knows? Maybe I am," Nagakura grunted. "But you're totally wrong for me."

"Huh?"

"If I'm gonna be gay, I want the kid," Nagakura said.

Shiiba knew he was talking about Mao. "Do you know how Mao feels about you?" he asked. "If you really want to be with him, why are you so cruel?"

Nagakura wasn't listening. "Don't take his side," he muttered. "Aw, shit, I'm all limp now."

Nagakura shrugged, rolled over, and lit a cigarette.

Just how serious was he? Shiiba wondered, feeling relieved as he fixed his clothes.

"Have you become attached to Munechika since you've been sleeping with him?" Nagakura asked seriously.

Shiiba hesitated. Nagakura wasn't joking around now.

"I could never sleep with an S," Nagakura declared. "An S is a pawn, a pet

dog. I have to abandon them when I need to.”

“Is that why you’re so cruel to Mao?” Shiiba asked pointedly.

“Nope,” Nagakura answered immediately. “That’s just who I am.”

Shiiba was finally starting to understand Nagakura. Though he could be mean to his informants, he wasn’t a cold man. He just didn’t want to have more feelings for them than necessary. Shiiba easily understood that. If the relationship turned personal, the job became even more difficult. Shiiba had been like that with Andou, his last S.

Shiiba remembered something Asakawa had said. Years ago, one of Nagakura’s informants had been killed for betraying her gang. That must have broken Nagakura’s heart.

“Asakawa told me that one of your informants died,” Shiiba said cautiously.

Nagakura eyed him with suspicion. “You know Asakawa?”

“He’s my brother-in-law’s friend,” Shiiba admitted. “I don’t see him much, but he was at my brother-in-law’s place a few days ago. When I mentioned that we worked together, he told me about your S.”

Nagakura looked annoyed. He didn’t really want people to know.

“He’s always been a gossip. Police should keep their mouths shut,” he grumbled.

“Did the police not protect your S?” Shiiba asked.

Nagakura was quiet for a moment, and then he sighed. “She was just an ordinary young woman. Could have been anyone’s wife. Her husband got sucked into the Yakuza world because of gambling debts. Soon a Yakuza member picked her for his own. She was a real beauty.”

Nagakura paused then shook his head. Shiiba could tell that it was hard for him to talk about his past.

“I heard the Yakuza sold guns, so I got friendly with her,” Nagakura continued faintly. “A year later she became my S. We eventually arrested the guy and took some guns, but the organization knew she had betrayed it. I begged my boss to

protect her, or at least give her money to run away. But they told me to cut her off.”

Shiiba could tell from Nagakura’s eyes that the pain was still fresh. The resentment inside him still burned.

“She was murdered?” he whispered.

“Not just murdered,” Nagakura said bitterly. “She was also gang-raped. They knocked her teeth out, broke her fingers, beat her beyond recognition. They threw her naked body in a landfill and left her to die.”

The tragedy left Shiiba speechless. Nagakura was living with that woman’s death on his conscience. Shiiba had felt the same way after Andou died.

“Now I keep my distance from informants,” Nagakura said. He grabbed Shiiba’s arm and looked at him intensely. “Why are you like that?” he demanded to know.

“Wh-what do you mean...?” Shiiba stuttered.

“How can you sleep with a Yakuza and still hold your head up? You act like there’s nothing even wrong with it.” Nagakura was deadly serious. He wasn’t joking around, he wanted an answer.

“Maybe I just have no shame,” Shiiba muttered, staring at the floor.

“No, you definitely feel guilty,” Nagakura said. “But you just know how to detach yourself. Where do you get your strength?”

“I’m not strong,” Shiiba said dully.

“I disagree. You sleep with men, but still think of them as equals,” Nagakura went on. “Look at Mao. Sometimes he rebelled against Kunugi, but never escaped his cage. Both of you sleep with men for favors, but unlike poor Mao, you never get attached. So much bad stuff has happened to the kid, I could almost cry. Though most of the time, I feel like strangling him.”

“You make no sense, Nagakura. Do you really like Mao?”

“Yeah. I love him,” Nagakura admitted.

Shiiba could hardly believe his ears. "C'mon, be serious," he snapped.

"I *am* being serious," Nagakura said hotly. "Mao's so sweet. I love him. I love him more than anything else. I want to be with him so much."

Shiiba still couldn't tell if he was kidding. "I never thought you were like that, Nagakura. If you care so much for Mao, why do you treat him like shit?"

"I'm a sadist. I need to bully people to get off."

Nagakura was dead-serious. He was so terrified to have feelings for anyone, he hid them behind a violent mask. He couldn't tell Mao he cared about him. If he bared his soul to Mao, Nagakura would never let him go. So Nagakura pretended to be a homophobe, making sure their relationship stayed strictly professional.

All of a sudden, Shiiba felt a little queasy. Nagakura's pain was so much like his own, Shiiba hated to even think about it.

"You should tell Mao how you feel," he said.

"No," Nagakura said flatly. "Mao is finally free from Kunugi and me. He has escaped his cage, and can fly wherever he wants to now. I hope he flies as far as he can, then I won't have to see him again."

Shiiba was starting to feel a little uncomfortable. It wasn't like Nagakura to spill his guts like this.

"You look really tired," he said.

Nagakura did look desolate, like a man who had lost something very important to him.

"Yeah, I am," Nagakura agreed. "Guess I said too much. I'm quitting after this case is over. I don't have much more time now."

Shiiba looked shocked, but Nagakura seemed determined.

"I've thought about it for a long time," Nagakura admitted. "I've been a detective for 10 years, but this undercover stuff never suited me."

"Why not hang on until you get your pension?" Shiiba suggested.

“I don’t have enough energy for another two years. If I did, I’d probably join the Yakuza for real. Earn a little dough, live the happy life...” Nagakura had always been apathetic, but now it seemed like he’d lost all zest for life. “I’m sleeping here tonight, so you can go now,” he told Shiiba. “If something happens, I’ll call you.”

“Listen, Nagakura. What should I do about Mao?” Shiiba asked.

“Can you look after him for a while?” Nagakura requested. “If he gets in the way, just kick him out. He knows Shinjuku well. He’ll find another place soon.”

He gave Shiiba a sly wink. “Now get out of here, before I try to take advantage of you again.”

He rolled onto his back and waved good-bye.

“You could have told me this over the phone. Why did you call me here?” Shiiba asked.

“I just had to see another detective,” Nagakura replied. “I keep feeling like I’m turning into a Yakuza. Sometimes I almost believe that I’m really Okamura of the Ikkou Society.”

No wonder Nagakura had been feeling so bad.

“Anyway, how’s the Kunugi case going?” he suddenly asked.

“Not well,” Shiiba admitted.

“Too bad.”

Shiiba left so Nagakura could get some sleep. But just as he was about to shut the door, Nagakura called out to him, “When the hawk is away, the little birds play.”

So Nagakura really did care for Mao. He threatened him, insulted him, sometimes even beat him, but all because he was in love with him.

Mao reminded Nagakura of the woman who had died for him. But he would never be able to tell Mao that.

On the way home later that day, Shiiba made sure he wasn't being tailed. He decided to call Mao, but his phone vibrated before he had the chance.

"Heard from Nagakura?" asked Section Chief Takasaki.

"We met a few hours ago," Shiiba revealed.

"You met Nagakura? What did he say?" Takasaki yelled.

Shiiba scowled and moved the phone away from his ear.

"Has something happened with the Ikkou?" he asked.

"Hold on, Shiiba..." Takasaki hissed to someone in the office before he got back on the line. "How fast can you get to Shinjuku Station?"

"I'm in Shinjuku right now," Shiiba told him.

"Good. See you soon," Takasaki barked, hanging up.

Must be an emergency, Shiiba thought, remembering the night of Andou's death. They had called him to the station then, too. Had something happened to Nagakura?

Ten minutes later, Shiiba was sitting in a room with Takasaki and four officers, including Asakawa. They just nodded at each other.

All four came from the Metropolitan: the COC4 chief, the COC5 chief, Asakawa, and the head of the fourth division. Something big must have happened for them to be gathered together like this.

Oomori, the COC5 chief, broke the ice. "Detective Shiiba, right? I heard about you from Takasaki. You did well on that Chinese massage parlor case."

Shiiba nodded. Though Oomori was his direct superior, he had met him only once before.

"How nice to praise your man, Mr. Oomori. But can we talk about the scandal now?" another man snapped, sounding annoyed.

"He is no longer my man," Oomori spat out. "Tell him, Mr. Takasaki."

"Shiiba, you already know that Intelligence here at Shinjuku Station is

handling the Kunugi case,” Takasaki said. “These men are all connected to that case.”

Takasaki sighed before he continued. “I hate to tell you this, but our main suspect is Kousuke Nagakura of COC5.”

Shiiba just gaped at Takasaki, unable to speak. That one of his own could be a murderer must be particularly painful for Takasaki.

“Give us the details, Asakawa,” Takasaki muttered.

“A college student from Shinjuku is our main witness,” Asakawa said. “He says he saw a man leave Kunugi’s car around two o’clock on that fateful night. He described him to our artist, and the sketch was a dead ringer for Nagakura. Nagakura’s fingerprints were also found in the car.”

The eyewitness’ report was important, but the fingerprints really sealed the deal. Nagakura must have been there, but something still bothered Shiiba.

“Why did the college student come forward now? And how could he remember Nagakura’s face so clearly?” he asked pointedly.

“Good questions,” Asakawa agreed. “Turns out the college student had been hanging out in Ochiai Park, a gay cruising area. He wanted to tell the police, but was afraid people would find out about his sexual preference.”

That makes sense, Shiiba thought.

“But he did make eye contact with the man who got out of the car,” Asakawa continued. “At first, the student thought it was one of his friends. But when he called out to him, the man just hurried away.”

So the student did get a good look at the man who was probably Nagakura. But why would Nagakura want to kill Kunugi? Shiiba couldn’t understand it.

“We are now looking for Nagakura,” Asakawa said.

“You don’t know where he is?” Shiiba asked with surprise.

Asakawa shook his head. “Nagakura’s Ikkou Society name was Okamura, but when we asked the Yakuza about Okamura, they said he’d gone missing three days ago. When did you last see him, Shiiba?”

“Around three o’clock at the Northern Hotel. Room 505.”

Asakawa grabbed his cell phone and ordered someone to go to the hotel. Shiiba suddenly remembered something Nagakura had said.

I don’t have much more time now.

Shiiba thought Nagakura had been talking about the end of his career. Nagakura must have known it was only a matter of time before the police caught up with him.

“Have you called Nagakura’s cell phone?” Shiiba asked.

“It’s turned off. No connection. We’ve called several of his friends, but they haven’t heard from Nagakura for months. Do you have any idea who he might want to contact?”

“His S, Mao Takanashi,” Shiiba answered. “He called Mao four days ago.”

“Where’s this Takanashi now?” Asakawa barked. They had no time to lose.

“Hiding at my friend’s apartment,” Shiiba admitted. “The Ikkou Society has been after him.”

“Was Nagakura close to this S?”

Shiiba fell silent for a moment, and then shook his head. “I’m not sure. Mao said their relationship was strained.”

Asakawa whispered something to the Fourth Division head, then turned back to Shiiba. “Can you bring Takanashi here?” he asked.

“Why?” Shiiba asked with surprise.

“We have to look into everything. Nagakura might contact him again, so we need him to be here with us,” Asakawa replied.

Takasaki gave Shiiba a stern look, warning him not to make waves. COC5 was in a very weak position right now, and Takasaki was in no mood to argue.

“We’ll send someone to pick him up,” he said gruffly.

“No, I’ll bring him in,” Shiiba said abruptly, getting up from his chair.

Asakawa followed him out of the room. “We’re not trying to mess up your investigation, Masaki. Please understand that.”

“I know. COC5 can’t interfere,” Shiiba said. “But Mao needs to be safe here.”

“I promise,” said Asakawa. “But this is a terrible day for us. Nagakura, a murderer?”

I’m quitting after this case is over.

What had Nagakura been feeling when he said that? He knew that the net was closing in around him. Maybe he still hoped for a quiet life somewhere out of sight.

Was that why he shared his feelings for Mao? Shiiba wondered.

Nagakura had been acting so strange today. Shiiba was angry at himself for not asking more questions.

Soon Shiiba was getting off the train in Roppongi. He had never felt so depressed.

What could he say to Mao? The man you love killed your sugar daddy? It would be too much for Mao to take.

Shiiba’s heart felt like lead as he headed for Munechika’s apartment. He opened the front door without knocking.

“Mao?” he called out.

“No way! The bad guy dies in the end!” someone was saying.

“He does not! He just makes everybody think he’s dead.”

“You’re crazy! That’s not what happened at all!”

Shiiba went into the living to find Mao and Munechika arguing over a movie. Mao brightened up when he saw Shiiba.

“Hey! How’s it going?” he asked cheerfully.

Munechika raised his eyebrows. Kaname was in the kitchen, cleaning up after

dinner.

Mao shot Munechika a haughty look.

“I know, let’s ask Shiiba! He definitely knows what happens in the end.”

Shiiba couldn’t help but smile a little. It was so funny to see the two of them discussing a movie.

“Shiiba, you know that big blockbuster with what’s his name? I’ve seen it three times already...”

Shiiba moved closer to Mao and gently touched his arm.

“Come with me and get your stuff,” he said softly, and then moved toward the bedroom.

Mao followed, instantly sensing that something was wrong. “But why?” he asked.

“The officers at Shinjuku Station need to talk to you.”

“But I already told you! I know nothing about Tahara,” Mao protested.

“It’s not about Tahara. It’s about Nagakura.”

Mao’s face turned pale. “Wh-what happened?” he choked out.

Shiiba decided to give it to him straight. “They suspect Nagakura murdered Kunugi.”

Mao looked completely stunned for a moment, then he violently shook his head.

“He couldn’t!” he screamed, grabbing the front of Shiiba’s shirt. “Nagakura’s a detective! He would never kill anyone. You know he wouldn’t, Shiiba!”

Judging from Mao’s reaction, he knew absolutely nothing about this. Shiiba sighed with relief.

“An eyewitness saw Nagakura get out of the car where they found Kunugi,” he revealed. “Detectives also found his fingerprints there. We don’t know where Nagakura is right now, but we think he ran away.”

Mao collapsed on the bed with shock. Shiiba forced himself to ask one more question.

“Did you sleep with Tahara for Nagakura?” he said quietly.

Mao snorted and stared at the floor.

“Yep. I seduced Tahara,” he admitted. “Tahara was Kunugi’s right hand man. He knew a whole lot about everything.”

“Did Nagakura force you to do that?” Shiiba asked, probing deeper.

Mao shook his head again. “No. I did it all by myself.”

“Because you liked Nagakura?” Shiiba asked gently.

Mao looked up with tears in his eyes, then quickly bowed his head. “I just wanted to help him. I wanted him to be successful...”

“Nagakura likes you, too. And so did Kunugi...” Shiiba said.

“No, he didn’t!” Mao screamed. “He thought I was nothing. But Nagakura would have never killed him or anyone else.”

Shiiba gently pulled Mao up from the bed. “C’mon, they’re waiting for us.”

“I don’t want to go!” Mao protested. “I only know what you just told me. Nagakura didn’t tell me anything on the phone.”

“Just answer their questions as best as you can,” Shiiba suggested. “You’re not a suspect, you know.”

“Kaname,” Munechika suddenly said. He had been quietly watching from the hallway.

“Yes, sir?”

“Take them to Shinjuku Station,” Munechika directed.

“I’ll bring the car around, sir.”

“Thanks, Kaname,” Shiiba said, leading a stunned Mao out of the guest room.

Munechika walked them to the door.

“Thank you, Munechika,” Shiiba said.

Munechika didn’t reply, but gently patted Mao’s head.

Chapter 6

Shiiba sat down on a bench and took a hamburger from a bag. This was his favorite place in the Shinjuku Imperial Garden, near the long lines of trees.

He quickly wolfed down his lunch, drank a can of coffee, and then gazed into the sky. It looked bright blue even through his sunglasses. He squinted at the trees in the distance. Their leaves looked like hands waving in the breeze. This peaceful place seemed worlds away from the noise and bustle of the city, but Shiiba still felt a little melancholy.

It had been over five days since he had taken Mao to Shinjuku Station. The department was trying to clean up the scandal before the media found out, but they still hadn't found Nagakura.

Shiiba's tired brain was full of questions. Why would Nagakura kill Kunugi? Was it jealousy? Or had it been an accident, a situation that veered wildly out of control?

But the motive wasn't all that important, really. The sad truth was Nagakura had strayed from the right path, not just as a detective, but as a human.

Am I like him, too? Shiiba wondered. You had to trust your S, but you couldn't fall in love. Once you developed feelings for him, everything would start to fall apart.

That was what was happening to Shiiba now. If his relationship with Munechika got any closer, he would cross that line, too. What had started as mild anxiety was now a full-fledged fear.

Shiiba's cell phone suddenly rang. He looked at the caller ID. Munechika

again. Shiiba sighed and turned his phone off.

Since the night he'd dropped by to pick up Mao, Shiiba had not spoken to Munechika. They hadn't met, he hadn't called. All the chaos about Nagakura and Mao had made Shiiba feel extremely vulnerable. He was terrified to show Munechika that side of him.

Shiiba gripped the cell phone in his pocket and silently spoke to Munechika.

I just need space and time right now. Please understand.

It was midnight.

As he walked towards his apartment in Setagaya, Shiiba instantly recognized the black Benz parked just ahead.

When he got closer, the back window opened. The one person Shiiba couldn't face peered out at him.

"Get in," Munechika grunted.

"Why?"

"Do I need a reason?" Munechika said.

Shiiba sighed and looked at his feet.

Munechika would never forgive him if he took off now.

Shiiba was still trying understand his feelings, but Munechika had had enough.

I can't keep running away from him, Shiiba thought, climbing in the back seat. Kaname started the engine. As they headed for Munechika's apartment, Shiiba quietly looked out the window.

Kaname parked the Benz at the front entrance.

"What should I do with the package, sir?" he asked Munechika.

Shiiba saw a beautifully-wrapped box on the front passenger seat. It looked like a present for someone.

“Bring it in with you.”

“Yes, sir.”

Munechika and Shiiba silently walked to Munechika’s apartment. It felt strange for Munechika to be so quiet, but Shiiba couldn’t think of a thing to say to him.

They went inside. Shiiba had just sat on the sofa when his phone rang. The call was from a phone booth. He answered with trepidation.

“Shiiba?” a man whispered.

Shiiba didn’t recognize the voice at first, then he suddenly jumped out of his seat. “Nagakura? Is that you?”

“Yep.”

“Where are you now?” Shiiba asked breathlessly.

“Why do you ask?” Nagakura’s voice suddenly sounded suspicious.

Shiiba didn’t know what to say.

“So they figured it out, huh?” Nagakura finally said.

“What?”

“It’s okay. I called Mao today, but he hung up on me. Is he with the police or something?” Nagakura asked.

Shiiba chose his words carefully. “He’s being guarded at Shinjuku Station. We needed to keep him safe from the Ikkou,” he explained nervously.

“I told you it’s okay, Shiiba,” Nagakura said. “I’m the prime suspect now.”

Shiiba fell silent again.

Nagakura snorted. “I killed Kunugi,” he said bluntly.

Nagakura’s casual confession made Shiiba tremble all over.

“But why, Nagakura?” Shiiba cried out.

“A stupid reason,” Nagakura answered. “It doesn’t matter now.”

“Please turn yourself in. The police are waiting for you,” Shiiba pleaded.

Now it was Nagakura’s turn to be silent. Shiiba repeated the request.

“Please go to the station, Nagakura. No one wants to cuff you.”

“I don’t want that either,” Nagakura said almost flippantly. “Maybe I should turn myself in.”

“How can you be so calm, Nagakura?” Shiiba gasped.

“Bye, Shiiba,” Nagakura said, and then hung up.

Shiiba returned his phone to his pocket and stood up.

Munechika grabbed his arm, asking, “Hold on. Where are you going?”

“To Shinjuku. I have to report this.”

“Report what?” Munechika huffed. “Did Nagakura say where he was? Did he tell you what happened with Kunugi?”

“No, but I have to let them know Nagakura called...”

“I won’t let you go. You have a duty to me,” Munechika said firmly.

Shiiba yanked his arm away. “Give me a break! I don’t have time to play with you now!” he said angrily.

Munechika slapped him hard. Shiiba fell backward to the floor. The side of his face stung, but he was more shocked than hurt.

“Give me a break? That’s my line,” Munechika growled. “How long will you keep running away from the things you want? What the hell were you doing when you asked me to be your S?”

He was plainly having trouble keeping his cool.

Shiiba tasted blood in his mouth as he looked up at him. “Just let me make a phone call,” he begged. “We can talk later, promise.”

“Solving murders isn’t your job. Remember?” Munechika snapped.

He pulled Shiiba up by his arms and dragged him toward the bedroom. Shiiba

struggled, but Munechika ignored him and opened the bedroom door.

“No, Munechika...” Shiiba pleaded.

Munechika threw him on the bed. When Shiiba tried to get up, Munechika hit him again.

“Don’t make me angry, Shiiba,” Munechika growled. “You should have known that I would bite you sooner or later. I’m your pet dog, after all.”

“Sir,” Kaname suddenly interrupted.

Shiiba glanced up. Kaname hovered outside the bedroom door, looking uncomfortable.

“If you’ve already brought in the package, just go,” Munechika ordered, keeping his eyes on Shiiba. But Kaname didn’t leave. Munechika turned and glared at him. “What are you doing? GO!”

“Mr. Keigo,” Kaname said softly, using Munechika’s name. “Please stop this.”

Munechika suddenly smiled and shook his head.

“This isn’t what it looks like, Kaname,” he assured him. “It’s Shiiba’s decision, not mine. I’m just waiting for his answer.”

Shiiba felt confused, but Kaname seemed to understand. He bowed his head and turned around. But before he walked away, he glanced back at them with a pitiful look.

Now that they were finally alone, Munechika stared down at Shiiba and took off his tie. Before Shiiba could resist, Munechika flipped him over and quickly bound his hands behind his back.

“What are you doing?” Shiiba gasped.

“Showing you exactly how our relationship really is.”

Munechika flipped Shiiba over again, and then started to rip off his clothes.

Shiiba desperately tried to push Munechika away. “If you want me, you can have me. But please, not like this,” he begged.

Munechika grabbed Shiiba's neck with one hand and squeezed tight. Shiiba gasped for breath.

"So you think sex is the problem, eh?" Munechika sneered. "No. The real problem is that you're scared to see Mao with Nagakura. But you can't go back there now. And don't fight me, because I can't control myself."

Shiiba had never been scared of Munechika before. Even though Munechika was a Yakuza, he wasn't a violent man. Shiiba trembled to see this new, cruel side of him.

"Sex is the only way to set things straight between us," Munechika growled.

Shiiba's shirt hung from his wrists, but the rest of his clothes had been ripped away. Though they had slept together many times, Shiiba had never been tied up before. He burned with shame.

"You don't have to test me. I would never ever betray you," he insisted.

"I know that. You could never forgive yourself. But would you betray yourself? The vow you made to me is your poison now. So I'll make you choose," Munechika said, pulling Shiiba's legs apart. He pushed the head of his hard member into Shiiba.

The pain of being taken so roughly made Shiiba gasp. "Wh-what...are...you...?" he stuttered.

"Enough talk. I'm getting what I want."

Munechika's eyes glittered as he took off his shirt.

"What? Why did you stop?" Munechika yelled. He was lying below Shiiba.

"Please, I need a break. My legs are tired," Shiiba pleaded.

"Bullshit! Keep going!" Munechika snapped, hitting Shiiba again.

With his face contorted in pain, Shiiba went back to thrusting. He could hear nothing but the squeaking mattress and his own breathing.

“Very nice!” Munechika sneered. “Do you like being tied up like this?”

Shiiba shook his head as he mechanically moved his hips. There was no pleasure in this. It felt empty. He had become a doll to Munechika. His heart was growing numb. Normally he would have resisted, but he had no energy to fight back. Right now, Shiiba was powerless.

“That’s enough. Get off,” Munechika ordered.

Shiiba did as told. Munechika grabbed his hair, pushed him down on the bed, and yanked Shiiba’s legs wide open.

“You’re nice and loose now.” Munechika snorted. “You were crying so sweetly. Looked like you were ready to come. Makes me so hot for you.” He pushed himself inside Shiiba again, then thrust slowly, over and over. “I feel your muscles contract every time I push in. You’re so tight! What a sexy hole you have,” Munechika purred.

So I’m just a hole, Shiiba thought. Just a place for Munechika to park his cock. A piece of meat to play with. No emotions. No feelings.

“Shall we do it from behind? I know you like it doggie-style,” Munechika mocked, flipping Shiiba over.

With his arms still tied behind his back, Shiiba couldn’t hold himself up. He really did feel like some pitiful dog. Munechika’s penis pushed up inside him.



“You’re no good with women because this is what you really want. You wanna be fucked by a man, any man, as long as he has a penis, right?”

“No!” Shiiba screamed, burying his face in the sheets.

“Admit it, Shiiba,” Munechika sneered. “Men excite you. You love to imagine them doing bad things to you, even your colleagues. Am I right?”

“No! I’ve never thought about that!”

Munechika dug his nails into Shiiba’s ass, piercing the raw flesh. “Tell the truth. Did you ever want to do it with a man? Did you ever want a man to fuck you over and over? Tell me and I’ll untie your hands.”

Shiiba’s arms already felt numb. If this went on, they could be permanently damaged, or so he thought. This was extremely unlikely, of course, but made perfect sense to his tormented mind.

“I did,” he whispered.

“Can’t hear you. Speak up,” Munechika said gruffly.

In between thrusts Shiiba managed to say the words Munechika demanded to hear.

“I’ve always wanted...men...to fuck me. Lots of men...” Shiiba choked out. He felt like crying, but the tears wouldn’t come. All of his pride had vanished.

True to his word, Munechika immediately untied his arms. Shiiba swung them around, but they still felt too numb to support his body.

“See? I knew you could be honest,” Munechika taunted. “Here’s your reward.”

He quickly grabbed Shiiba’s erect cock.

“No, Munechika...” Shiiba gasped, shaking his head. He knew he was seconds away from orgasm.

Munechika ignored him and kept pounding from behind.

“I’ll make you come,” he whispered.

“No! You’re going to hit me again! No, please, no...” Shiiba sobbed. He felt powerless before Munechika now, but tried not to think about it. That was his protection. If he thought about the pain, he shook with terror.

“Be a good child,” Munechika said. “If you want to come, you can.”

“Aaaaah...” Shiiba moaned, saliva running down his chin. His whole body intensely craved release. His desire to ejaculate was so great, he started rocking back and forth, meeting each thrust of Munechika’s cock. He felt absolutely shameless now.

Munechika’s right, Shiiba thought. I’m definitely a pervert.

“I...I can’t...” he gasped.

“Do it, you little whore! It’ll feel so good...” Munechika urged.

Shiiba didn’t even hear him, lost in the pleasure of Munechika’s hard penis inside him.

“Ah...ah...ngh...ahh...” he moaned.

Suddenly he ejaculated into Munechika’s palm. The warm semen dripped onto the sheets. Munechika held Shiiba up so he wouldn’t collapse.

“Not so fast, Shiiba. You have to make me come, too,” Munechika ordered.

He’s not finished yet?

Shiiba looked up, pleading, but Munechika wouldn’t let him stop, or even let him rest.

“Masaki,” Munechika said suddenly.

It was the first time he had ever used Shiiba’s first name, a strange moment in this peculiar battle.

“Get on top of me again,” Munechika whispered gently.

When Shiiba woke up, he was alone.

He glanced at the clock on the wall. Almost noon. Munechika was probably at work.

Shiiba remembered seeing the sun rise, but his mind was blank after that.

Did I faint—or fall asleep? he wondered.

His knees buckled when he tried to get out of bed, and he tumbled to the floor. How pitiful he had become.

He gasped at his reflection in the mirror. His lip was cut and his face was covered in bruises. Another place hurt even worse, though you wouldn't know from just looking at it. This ache was deep inside him, where Munechika had been thrusting.

Shiiba hopped in the shower and let warm water rain over him. What had happened yesterday? Why couldn't he resist Munechika? He felt like he'd been under some powerful spell.

Munechika had been strange, too. He was always strong, but never violent.

Last night was different. Munechika had assaulted Shiiba, both physically and mentally.

Shiiba never imagined that Munechika could get so angry with him. Shiiba had been wrong to blow him off for so long, but Munechika didn't have to punish him like that.

I said I'd never betray him, Shiiba thought. *Why can't he just believe me?*

"Would you betray yourself?" Munechika had asked him.

Of course not. No one would. People always tried to protect themselves.

Since his family was gone, Shiiba always had to believe in himself. He took pride in his self-sufficiency. He was here because he had believed in himself, been true to himself.

They hadn't been together that long, but Shiiba thought he and Munechika really understood each other. But why did Munechika become so angry? Why did he hurt Shiiba?

Maybe you could never really understand another person, no matter how many times you slept with them. Last night Shiiba finally discovered this bitter truth.

Chapter 7

Shiiba knew Munechika would be home late, so he went back to bed. Terrifying dreams disturbed his sleep: being chased, being killed, falling from high places. He would bolt awake, then try to fall asleep again. When he finally got up, he was even wearier than before.

Since his bruises ached, and he didn't feel like riding the train, Shiiba took a taxi back to his apartment.

The road was dark when he left the taxi, so he quickly walked into his building. Two other residents were waiting for the elevator. He decided to take the stairs, but almost instantly regretted his decision. It was a struggle just to walk, but somehow he hauled himself up the three flights of stairs.

He staggered down the hallway to his apartment, unlocked the door, and went inside. The dining room lights were on. He really should be more careful, he told himself. Just then he spotted another man's shoes on the floor.

Shiiba sucked his breath in and tiptoed toward his bedroom. He peeked through the half-open door—and then gasped in astonishment.

“Nagakura? How did you get in?”

Nagakura looked up from Shiiba's bed, where he was sprawled out in all directions.

“C'mon now, you're a detective,” he drawled. “You must know that people pick locks.”

Shiiba started to tell him off, but decided to keep quiet. He took off his jacket and sat on the edge of his bed.

“How long have you been here?” he asked instead.

“Since last night. Man, your cupboard is bare. I had to order pizza.”

An empty pizza box sat on the nightstand, along with a beer can and an overflowing ashtray. The air in the bedroom smelled. Nagakura must have been chain-smoking.

This guy had some nerve.

“What happened to your face? You don’t look so sexy anymore,” Nagakura teased.

Shiiba suddenly remembered his bruises and felt embarrassed.

“Never mind, okay?” he snapped. “You’re at the wrong place, Nagakura. You should be at police headquarters.”

“You’re not the boss of me, Shiiba. I can do whatever I want,” Nagakura barked.

“Why did you come here then? Do you want me to arrest you?” Shiiba challenged.

Nagakura smiled his old familiar smile. He seemed just the same as always. In fact, Shiiba nearly forgot that he was supposed to be a murderer.

Suddenly Nagakura moved closer and pulled up Shiiba’s sleeves. Both wrists showed angry marks where Munechika had tied them together.

“Whoa! You’re into bondage?” Nagakura asked with surprise.

Shiiba avoided looking at him. “You’ve got it wrong,” he muttered.

“You don’t have to hide from me. Was it Munechika? You two have fun last night? Bet you really enjoyed it.”

“It wasn’t like that,” Shiiba insisted.

“So Munechika is a sadist, just like me.”

“Shut up! I said it wasn’t like that!” Shiiba screamed, yanking Nagakura by his collar.

“You mean Munechika isn’t a pervert?” Nagakura snorted. “I see. So what *did* Munechika do to you then? Tie you up? Slap you around?” He pushed Shiiba on

the bed and pinned him down. “Bet he left marks all over you. Am I right, Shiiba? Why cover up for him?” he yelled.

Shiiba shuddered, but didn’t answer.

“You should hate him for doing this!” Nagakura went on. “You’re not the type who likes to get beat up, especially by your S. He stomped on your male pride, Shiiba! That must have felt like crap.”

Nagakura could tell Shiiba had been deeply hurt, just from the look on his face.

“Why don’t you run away?” Nagakura asked softly.

“He’s not usually like this,” Shiiba insisted. “This was an accident.”

But his excuses couldn’t hide the truth.

Nagakura just shook his head. “You’re a strong man, Shiiba. I’m jealous of you.”

“Strong? Me?” Shiiba snorted, laughing in spite of himself.

He ran away from Munechika because he was afraid to get too close. That was why this had all happened. How could Nagakura call him strong? He was a mess, inside and out.

“If I’d been strong like you, my life could have been different,” Nagakura muttered.

He had no idea how Shiiba really felt.

“Stop it!” Shiiba cried out, unable to take it anymore. He punched Nagakura’s chest with his fists. “I’m not strong! I just pretend to be! My real self wants to run away and cry, but my pride gets in the way.”

Shiiba hated himself for having these feelings, for being so weak. “You’re lucky, Nagakura,” he snapped. “You didn’t sleep with Mao. Sleeping with your S is slow suicide...”

Getting beat up by Munechika had made Shiiba’s heart burst wide open. He didn’t care how pathetic he looked. In fact, it felt good to finally spill his guts.

“Sleeping with Munechika has made me crazy,” he gasped. “You say I’m not dirty, but I am. I just wear a clean mask so people won’t see the real me. But I just can’t wear it anymore. I can’t, I can’t...”

Last night’s tension had taken its toll. Shiiba felt consumed by anxiety and fear.

“I can never recover from this! What should I do?” he choked. “I don’t even know who I am anymore...”

“Shiiba,” Nagakura said softly, gathering Shiiba into his arms.

When Shiiba resisted, Nagakura held him even tighter.

“You’re not dirty, Shiiba,” Nagakura whispered. “Who cares who you sleep with? You’ll never be like me, so don’t worry about it. It’s okay, it’s okay...”

As Nagakura gently stroked his back, Shiiba finally stopped trembling. He lost all track of time as he snuggled closer to Nagakura, close enough to feel the other man’s heartbeat. Shiiba had never really listened to someone’s heart before.

He lifted his head to find Nagakura gazing down at him with his hard brown eyes.

His eyes are so cruel, yet his touch is so gentle, Shiiba thought. Once, he had despised this man, but now he felt so close to him.

“You’ll never be like me,” Nagakura had told him.

It hurt Shiiba to know that their paths would be very different now. Nagakura’s detective days were over, and he would never see Mao again.

Thinking about Nagakura’s words, Shiiba had a sudden realization. Nagakura wasn’t talking to him. He was really talking to Mao.

Nagakura wanted to hold Mao, squeeze him tight, whisper in his ear. But now he’d never have the chance to make up for lost time. Mao would always remember Nagakura as a cold, violent man.

Shiiba lifted his hand and gently stroked the rough stubble on Nagakura’s tired face. He suddenly felt a tenderness stirring inside him. Had Mao’s feelings

for Nagakura moved into Shiiba's heart? And did Nagakura see Mao in Shiiba? Shiiba felt sad as Nagakura caressed his cheek.

"Shiiba," Nagakura whispered, pulling him so close their breaths mingled.

Finally he broke the wall. He leaned forward and gave Shiiba a kiss.

As soon as their lips touched, Shiiba opened his mouth, inviting Nagakura inside. Their tongues danced together as Nagakura squeezed Shiiba tight.

Their kiss was so passionate, Shiiba forgot everything for a while. They drew apart for a moment, both gasping for breath. Suddenly Nagakura bit Shiiba's neck, hard enough to draw blood.

The sharp pain instantly brought Shiiba back to earth.

"Nagakura. We can't do this," he moaned.

"I know," Nagakura sighed, clinging to Shiiba like a child with a new toy. They stayed like that for a while until Nagakura finally released his grip. "Uh, sorry about that," he said lightly, taking out a cigarette. The tormented man seemed to have totally vanished.

Shiiba sat up and ran his fingers through his hair.

"I need a drink, Shiiba," Nagakura suddenly whined. "There'll be no booze where I'm going."

Shiiba felt relieved. Nagakura sounded like he was ready to turn himself in.

"I just have beer," Shiiba said, looking in his fridge.

"That's okay," Nagakura said with a nod. "You have one, too."

"I'm fine," Shiiba said, lighting a cigarette. He sat next to Nagakura. "Why did you decide to confess now?"



“At first, I wanted to keep going until I found the weapons,” Nagakura admitted. “But the Ikkou Society knows I offed Kunugi, so I’m Enemy Number

One to them. They have to kill me just to save face. If the Yakuza get me first, the police will have to pick up lots of little pieces.”

“Why did you kill him?” Shiiba asked. It was a hard question, but he had to know the answer.

Nagakura sat quietly for a while, and then nodded. “Remember when we talked about Munechika’s dinner with Sagami? That same night, Kunugi went out drinking with Tahara in Ginza. Tahara phoned me from the toilet and said Kunugi was going to his weapons cache. This was the first time Tahara was going to see the guns.”

“Did you use his affair with Mao to blackmail Tahara? Is that why he did what you said?” Shiiba asked pointedly.

“Well, Tahara always needed cash, so he didn’t need much persuading. Mao had gotten valuable information from him before, but now Tahara was even more useful.”

“So what happened next?” Shiiba prompted.

“I followed Kunugi and Tahara in a taxi after they left the bar. They drove to an industrial area in Kawasaki. I waited until they went in, and then peeped in a window.” Nagakura took another slug of beer then continued. “The place was full of scrap metal, but they came out right away and took off in their car. Lucky for me, the lock was easy to pick. I went inside and looked around. Suddenly I saw a big container. ‘This is it!’ I thought.”

Like a street mime, Nagakura opened a pretend treasure chest and squinted inside.

“It was empty,” he said with a sigh.

“Too bad,” Shiiba said ruefully.

“Suddenly the door swung open,” Nagakura said, looking agitated. “Kunugi came in with a gun. He had figured out that I was following him, so he lured me to this phony place. Good thing Tahara was there! He was so afraid I’d tell on him, he grabbed Kunugi’s gun. I took it from him and shot Kunugi.”

As Nagakura told his story, Shiiba felt angrier and angrier, and now he exploded with rage. “You didn’t have to kill him! You could have called for back-up! We’d get him for gun possession. Maybe he would have led us to his weapons stash.”

“I had to,” Nagakura said quietly, staring at his beer can. “But you’re absolutely right. I pulled the trigger without thinking. Never thought I had the nerve to kill somebody. I surprised even myself.”

“Did you hate him because he forced Mao to be his lover? Is that why you shot him?” Shiiba demanded to know.

“Okay, I was jealous,” Nagakura admitted. “But I hated him for another reason. Once, he killed a woman.”

“A woman...or your lover?” Shiiba snapped.

“She wasn’t my lover, though we did have sex. First and foremost, she was my S.”

His S?

Shiiba’s arms broke out in goosebumps.

So Nagakura actually had two good reasons to kill the man: not only had Kunugi killed his last S, he was sleeping with his current one.

“You knew that Kunugi killed her? Is that why you infiltrated the Ikkou?” Shiiba asked.

“Actually, I was ordered to do that. It was a complete coincidence. I only found out recently that Kunugi killed her. Tahara told me. Once, when they were out drinking, Kunugi boasted about killing a woman who had ratted on one of his gang members. He said they beat her up, gang-raped her, and then left her on the street. Kunugi had been in the Yamato Group with the man who hooked up with my S. I entered the Ikkou Society soon afterward. I wanted to find those weapons more than anything else.”

Shiiba felt strangely close to Nagakura right now. They really were quite alike. Both had suffered terrible losses at the hands of the Yakuza, and both had lost

an S to murder. One other thing united them: they both hated the system that didn't protect people, yet they still remained a part of it.

Looking at Nagakura was like looking in a mirror, Shiiba realized. Mao had said the two of them were similar.

"Who knows when I first thought about killing him," Nagakura went on. "Maybe I always wanted to. When I finally got the chance, it was so easy. Guess I'm just weak."

So that was what Nagakura had been talking about at the hotel. He was jealous of Shiiba's ability to turn the other cheek, to get his revenge in a more law-abiding way.

"Why did you move Kunugi's body?" Shiiba asked.

"I needed time to find the guns. I figured the police would peg the Yagami Group at first, so it didn't matter where they found the body."

"Where is Tahara now?"

"He got scared and ran off," Nagakura grunted, shaking his head. "If the Ikkou knew that he'd been helping me, he'd have hell to pay. He's probably shivering under his quilt somewhere."

He stood up. "Time to go," he said grimly.

"I'll go with you," Shiiba quickly offered.

Nagakura instantly looked upset. "Why? I'm not running anymore. Are you trying to get brownie points with the bosses?"

"Just to the door. I won't go in," Shiiba promised.

Nagakura shrugged, and they left the room together. Outside, they flagged down a taxi and headed for Shinjuku. They left the taxi just before Shinjuku Station.

As soon as Nagakura walked through the door, his detective days would be over.

"My last steps as a free man," he muttered, taking out a cigarette.

Shiiba lit one, too.

“Damn, no matches left,” Nagakura scowled, tossing the empty matchbox in the air. Shiiba offered his lighter, but Nagakura shook his head. “No, thanks. Cigarettes don’t taste right with a lighter.”

That was news to Shiiba, but now that he thought about it, Nagakura had always used matches. Everybody has their quirks, Shiiba thought.

“Lean closer. I’ll light mine on yours,” Nagakura ordered.

Shiiba did as told, touching the ends of their cigarettes together. Nagakura sucked in his breath as his cigarette ignited. A thin trail of smoke wafted into the air. Nagakura gazed at Shiiba through the smoke.

“What?” Shiiba asked.

“It would have been nice to sleep together.”

“You mean with Mao?”

“No. I mean with you,” Nagakura said wistfully.

Shiiba choked on his cigarette and glared at Nagakura, who was sadly puffing away.

“I almost forced myself on you last night,” Nagakura admitted, walking slowly toward the station.

Shiiba trailed behind him.

“I was going to practice on you,” Nagakura said.

“A rehearsal is never the same as the real thing,” Shiiba muttered.

Nagakura exhaled a gust of smoke, which slowly floated toward the sky.

“What will you do about Mao?” Shiiba asked.

“Nothing. I can’t do anything.”

Nagakura was telling the truth. Since he was a police officer, they’d throw the book at him. He’d go to prison for a long, long time.

“Do you want me to tell him something?” Shiiba asked.

“Nah. Let him forget all about me. He’ll probably fall in love with a total jerk now. Makes me laugh. But remembering his sweet face when we first met still gives me the shivers.”

No wonder he told him his real name, Shiiba thought.

Nagakura had special feelings for Mao right from the start. He must have seen something in the young boy that reminded him of his murdered S.

“Are you sure?” Shiiba persisted.

“You’re such a softy, Shiiba! Worrying about other people will put you in an early grave,” Nagakura said fiercely. He turned to Shiiba and lowered his voice. “Don’t trust everything the bosses say. We’re the screws that keep the system together. If we disobey, they’ll just find a new screw. We all know way too much, so if there’s a scandal, we’ll be the first to go.”

Deep down, Shiiba knew he was right, but Nagakura had even more to say.

“When Arms and Narcotics first started S work, the higher-ups were enthusiastic. We could do whatever we wanted, as long as we didn’t kill anybody. But some detectives drifted to the wrong side, and started working only for themselves.”

Nagakura sighed. This was his last piece of advice, but Shiiba suddenly had the urge to tell him something.

“You’re not weak, Nagakura,” Shiiba insisted.

Nagakura looked at him with surprise.

“If I ever meet the man who killed my sister, I’ll probably do the same thing,” Shiiba admitted.

If he had a loaded gun in his hand, Shiiba knew he could pull the trigger without a second thought. That was the nature of guns, they made killing easy. Only one tiny, mechanical movement was required, no human interaction whatsoever. The sheer simplicity of it turned normal people into murderers.

“You couldn’t do what I did. And you won’t, I guarantee it,” Nagakura said

firmly, patting Shiiba's head.

Shiiba still had much left to say, but they had reached Shinjuku Station. They paused to look at each other.

"You've come far enough, Shiiba," Nagakura said. "There is one thing you can do for me, though."

Shiiba thought Nagakura was referring to Mao, but the doomed detective had a different request.

"The Ikkou's weapons. You have to find them," Nagakura said bluntly.

Nagakura had made a grave mistake, but, in the end, he was still a detective.

Shiiba nodded. Nagakura smiled his wry smile, then started walking toward the door, both hands in his pockets. His shoulders slumped a little, but he kept on walking.

"Okamura!" someone called out suddenly.

Shiiba turned to see a man running toward them, holding a gun.

"Nagakura!" Shiiba screamed, just as the shot rang out.

Nagakura had turned around to look, giving the man a perfect target. He slumped to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

A woman passing by screamed with shock. The shooter jumped into a car and zoomed off into the night.

Soon police officers came flooding out of the station. They cried out with indignation as they surrounded Nagakura's body. Shiiba just stood there, holding his breath, as blood streamed over the sidewalk.

Nagakura had decided to turn himself in, to face up to his crime. Why did they have to shoot him?

"Masaki," someone said.

Shiiba looked up to see Asakawa coming toward him.

"What happened? Is this Nagakura?" Asakawa gasped.

Shiiba just nodded, still in shock. He could hear sirens in the distance. They must have called an ambulance.

“He was going to turn himself in...” Shiiba started to say, but the sirens drowned him out.

The room seemed deathly quiet. Mao had been crouched on the leather sofa for a long time, hugging his knees. Finally he spoke.

“I can’t believe Nagakura killed Kunugi.”

“Why?” Shiiba asked.

Mao turned to him, and then looked down again. His long eyelashes cast shadows on his cheeks.

“Tahara called me the night Kunugi was murdered, before I knew he was dead. Tahara seemed really upset, crying and talking crazy. He told me to stay put, but I had no idea what he was talking about. When I saw the news about Kunugi’s murder, I figured Tahara did it. I wondered if he was scared because of Nagakura. Then I started to think...”

Mao sighed and buried his face in his knees.

“Mr. Shiiba, I know where the weapons are,” Mao said in a low voice.

Shiiba felt surprised, and yet not surprised. “Where?”

“In that factory where Nagakura killed Kunugi.”

“But Nagakura said nothing was there,” Shiiba said.

“Not in the warehouse. I saw them in the office. Kunugi showed me. Tons of pistols, and automatic weapons, too.”

Nagakura had been so close, but reality had not been kind to him.

“Why didn’t you tell Nagakura? Were you trying to punish him or something?” Shiiba asked.

Mao looked like he was about to cry. “No. I didn’t tell him because I wanted

to stay with him. If Nagakura found the weapons, he wouldn't need me anymore..."

Shiiba felt his throat tighten as he listened to Mao's confession. Poor kid. He kept his mouth shut all this time, terrified that Nagakura would let him go.

Shiiba patted Mao's head and stood up. "Wait here. I'll get us some coffee."

The sixth floor interview room had been emptied for Mao, luckily for Shiiba. Since Investigations was on the seventh floor, he didn't have to worry about bumping into the other detectives. He stepped into the corridor and saw Takasaki walking toward him, just back from the hospital.

"Shiiba," Takasaki said quietly.

"Contact the Incidents Team," Shiiba said in a rush. "The Ikkou Society probably doesn't know yet. If we don't hurry..."

"Shiiba," Takasaki repeated, a little louder this time.

Shiiba looked at the floor in agony, bracing himself for the bad news.

"They couldn't save Nagakura. It was too late," Takasaki said, rubbing his eyes.

He looked totally exhausted. The whole Nagakura situation had ripped his heart to pieces.

"Did he say anything else to you? I mean, other than his confession?" he asked tiredly.

Shiiba had already told Takasaki that Nagakura killed Kunugi in self-defense, but he didn't tell his boss that Kunugi had murdered Nagakura's former S.

There were so many things Shiiba wanted to share with Takasaki.

The incredible stress Nagakura was under, his deep mistrust of the system.

But Shiiba kept his mouth shut, knowing Takasaki would not really be interested.

"Nagakura did say that he planned to quit after this case," Shiiba offered instead.

“If only he’d found the weapons sooner. He could have retired and lived a good life,” Takasaki said with a sigh.

If Nagakura had found the weapons sooner, he would still be alive. But one small detail had steered Nagakura’s life on to a completely different path.

Shiiba heard something behind him and turned around.

Mao had been listening to their conversation and was staring at them with wide eyes. Now that he knew Nagakura was dead, he didn’t scream or even cry. He just looked stunned.

“Mao? What’s wrong?” Shiiba asked gently.

“It’s all my fault!” Mao cried out. “I should have told him where the weapons were! Then he’d still be alive!”

But he had loved Nagakura, so he hadn’t share the secret. Ironically, Mao’s love for Nagakura had contributed to his death. Or was Mao being too fatalistic?

But Nagakura had pulled the first trigger, and Kunugi’s man had pulled the trigger on him. Mao had nothing to do with it.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Shiiba said softly, putting his arms around Mao.

Several hours later, Asakawa appeared in the sixth floor interview room, carrying two cans of coffee. Operations on the seventh floor had finally calmed down.

“Where’s Mao Takanashi?” he asked.

“I just took him to a hotel,” Shiiba said tiredly.

It was a business hotel next to Shinjuku Station.

“Did he look all right?” Asakawa asked.

“A bit pale, but he’d calmed down a bit.”

Takasaki had already gone to the factory with a Weapons Team to retrieve

the guns. This was a great day for the department, but Shiiba couldn't feel pleased.

"I'm still in shock," Asakawa said quietly. "This was the absolute worst outcome."

Now that the suspect was dead, Nagakura would officially go down in the records as Kunugi's murderer. The case had finally been solved.

"Well, looks like my work is done here," Shiiba said.

"Sorry for making you look after Takanashi," Asakawa said sleepily, rubbing the stubble on his chin. It was almost daybreak.

"I should thank you," Shiiba said.

"Were you close to Nagakura, Masaki?" Asakawa asked. He looked like he'd just remembered something.

"Why do you ask?" Shiiba asked cautiously.

"He came to see you before he turned himself in," Asakawa pointed out.

"Not really," Shiiba answered with a shrug. "We were just colleagues. Before this case, we had barely even talked to each other."

"Then why did he want to see you?" Asakawa wondered.

"Probably because we were in the same position," Shiiba guessed. "We both did S work. He probably thought I would understand why he did what he did."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't really explain it. It's...it's just our job."

Shiiba knew that was a vague answer, but Asakawa didn't press him any further.

"Do you think Mao will be okay, Asakawa?" Shiiba asked with concern.

Right now, Mao was the only person Shiiba really cared about.

"We found the weapons, so the Ikkou Society doesn't need him now. It has bigger problems, anyway. The group originally blamed the Yagami Group for

Kunugi's death. Its members never expected this turn of events."

Shiiba felt relieved, but Asakawa had even more news.

"This actually might break up the Ikkou Society," he speculated. "Kunugi's dead. They lost the weapons. At this point, the Yagami Group can easily grab the Kansai area away from them, and then move on to the Matsukura Group. But the Matsukura Group knows this already, and are probably helping the Ikkou Society behind the scenes."

This was the first time Shiiba had heard about this, and he couldn't hide his surprise. He knew that Munechika was friendly with Sagami from the Ikkou Society, but he hadn't been informed of any other relationship.

As a member of the Matsukura Group, Munechika would be devastated by the news of the weapons seizure. The Matsukura Group would do everything in its power to keep the Ikkou Society together.

Shiiba got up from the sofa and bowed to Asakawa.

"I'm going home now," he said.

"Let's have dinner with Shino again soon," Asakawa suggested. "Or we could all go look at the cherry blossoms. There should still be some left."

They nodded to each other, even though both knew they'd be too busy to do anything like that.

"Sounds good," Shiiba agreed, leaving the room.

Outside Shinjuku Station, the sun was just coming up. There were only a few cars on the road and the air still smelled fresh and new.

Shiiba dragged his tired body down the deserted sidewalk.

Chapter 8

Shiiba put on his flashiest clothes and left the house, off to meet an informant who ran a Shinjuku bath house. Once in Shinjuku, he had a sudden change of heart and hopped a train to Marunouchi.

Ever since the incident, Shiiba had been taking a lot of time off work. In fact, today was his seventh day away. He had 20 vacation days every year, so as long as he gave notice, it wasn't a problem. Takasaki had called a few times, urging him to come back, but he mostly gave Shiiba his space. Seeing a colleague murdered right in front of you could be traumatizing, Takasaki knew.

But Shiiba couldn't take advantage of Takasaki's kindness forever. He planned to drag himself back to work, but when the day actually arrived, he still felt too lazy to go.

Nagakura's death had often come back to haunt him, like the delayed pain of a punch to the gut. Shiiba found that he had lost all will to keep standing in the ring.

As the train swayed, Shiiba gripped a handrail near the door, staring blankly at his reflection in the window. He wore sunglasses to cover his black eye, but they didn't hide everything. Most of his face was still a mess. He looked at the man in front of him.

Hey, you. If you're not working, what are you doing? Shiiba silently asked.

But the man just wearily stared back at him.

Feeling bored, Shiiba glanced at the advertisements above the windows. A big headline from a weekly magazine read "Good and Evil: the Detective Who

Murdered A Kingpin.”

The story had captured the public’s imagination, and with good reason. A police officer shot a gang boss, and then was gunned down himself, right before he was about to confess. The situation had spiraled out of control, and the police worked round the clock just dealing with the media.

But the whirlwind was finally starting to die down. The man who murdered Nagakura had turned himself in, and the COC5 Incidents team had impounded a huge case of weapons. For all practical purposes, the case was over.

Soon people would forget all about it, just like they forgot about Yukari’s murder. Back then, Shiiba had also been swept up in a media frenzy, but six months later, nobody ever brought it up. Andou’s death had been exactly the same.

But for those directly involved, the bitter memories would last forever. Nagakura’s death was just the latest tombstone for Shiiba to grieve over.

Mao had checked out of the hotel near Shinjuku Station and completely disappeared, leaving a letter addressed to Shiiba in his room. Asakawa brought it to him one day.

Thank you for everything. It’s all okay now.

That was it. Shiiba suddenly thought of a baby bird taking flight.

“He finally escaped his cage. He can fly wherever he wants to now,” Nagakura had said, way back in that shabby hotel.

But for a little bird who actually wanted to remain caged, Mao’s new freedom must be tinged with sadness. The hawk was no longer around to bully him, but the little bird still couldn’t be happy. He wanted to stay with the hawk forever. As hurtful as that situation was, to the bird it felt like home.

Shiiba had called Mao’s cell phone a few times, but the number seemed to be disconnected. Believing that this was what Mao wanted, Shiiba had deleted the number from his speed dial.

Shiiba got off the train at the seventh station past Shinjuku. Emerging from

underground, he found himself directly across the street from the 21-story Central Metropolitan Government Building Number Two. Police headquarters occupied the top six floors.

It was late, but Shiiba still saw lights in a few windows. He wondered if one of those windows could be Shinozuka's office.

Shiiba didn't really come here to see Shinozuka. He could have just gone to his house to do that. For some reason, he just felt like seeing the place where Shinozuka worked.

I wonder if Shinozuka ever feels like ditching his job, Shiiba wondered, and then quickly snapped back to reality.

Shinozuka wasn't like him; he was one of the chosen ones. The police force had almost 270,000 members, but only 500 were on a career track. That relatively small number kept the enormous organization moving. Only those who could handle the stress were allowed to rise to the top.

Shinozuka was definitely strong. Though he sometimes had to make agonizing decisions, he could still share a laugh with his friends. Shiiba was jealous of his brother-in-law's strength, jealous to the point of frustration.

All of a sudden, Shiiba needed to hear Shinozuka's voice. He selected the number in his phone and pressed the call button.

"Hello, Masaki," Shinozuka said, after only one ring. "I'm surprised to hear from you. Is something wrong?"

"Not really. I just, uh, wanted to hear your voice," Shiiba shyly admitted.

He felt that Shinozuka was smiling on the other end.

"How nice of you," Shinozuka said. "Want to meet up in a few minutes?"

"Aren't you still working?" Shiiba asked.

"All done for today," Shinozuka replied. "Actually, I was just leaving. Where should we meet? Where are you now?"

As if on cue, Shinozuka emerged from the building. From his vantage point across the street, Shiiba saw Shinozuka talking on his cell phone, but couldn't

make out his expression. Shinozuka was headed for the subway entrance.

“Stop!” Shiiba said suddenly.

“Huh? Why?”

“I’m right across the street, in front of the Justice Building.”

Shinozuka looked in that direction. When he spotted Shiiba, he waved his hand.

“What a surprise!” he said. “Can you come across?”

“Sorry, I don’t have time. I’m about to meet someone,” Shiiba lied. The last place he wanted to go was some fast-food restaurant with bright lights. He didn’t want Shinozuka to see his bruised face.

“I see. Then let’s talk while we walk,” Shinozuka suggested.

Shiiba hesitated. “But...”

“Let’s head toward the Imperial Gardens. There won’t be police officers around at this hour. We can cross paths over the bridge. Here, I’ll go first.”

Shinozuka started walking, and Shiiba soon followed his lead, walking at the same pace on the opposite side of the street.

They passed the Metropolitan Police Building, turned at the Sakurada gate intersection, crossed at the first signal, and finally approached the bridge that led to the Imperial Palace. Shinozuka crossed first and waited for Shiiba.

“Sorry to call you out of the blue like this,” Shiiba apologized.

Shinozuka looked at Shiiba in surprise, but didn’t say anything. Shiiba felt like running away from the questioning look on Shinozuka’s face.

“Want to walk toward Otemachi?” Shinozuka suggested. “Are you okay with your time?”

“Yeah,” Shiiba agreed. “Do you always work this late?”

“Actually, this is a pretty early night for me,” Shinozuka said with a laugh. “How about you? Is everything okay?”

Normally Shiiba would instantly reply that everything was fine, but tonight he hesitated.

“Going through some tough times,” he finally muttered.

“Want to talk about it?” Shinozuka offered. “Might make you feel better. You try to do too much by yourself, Shiiba.”

Moved by the kind words, Shiiba stopped in his tracks. “That’s okay. I feel a little better just seeing you.”

“Likewise,” Shinozuka said with a smile. “You make me forget how tired I am. I think this is the first time you’ve ever been to see me without being invited.”

“Sorry about that,” Shiiba said, but Shinozuka just laughed again.

“Any problems at work?” Shiiba went on.

“Everybody has problems, and I’m no different,” Shinozuka said, sighing. “Asakawa’s setting up a new headquarters and hasn’t come back. Guess all this has been tough on COC5, too.”

Shinozuka probably knew that Shiiba was in the middle of a case, or at least he gave that impression.

“A person like me has another set of worries,” Shinozuka continued. “Whenever it’s time to give orders to my subordinates, I always get scared.”



“Scared? You?” Shiiba said, looking surprised.

Shinozuka smiled. “Yeah, me. What if my orders are wrong? What if a

situation can't be fixed? Sure, I get scared, but I can't show it, or my men will worry. When I give orders, I try to hide my emotions. It's probably made me a pretty unpopular boss."

The image of Shinozuka coldly giving orders to his subordinates was a far cry from the gentle face in front of Shiiba now.

"An organization is like a large rock," Shinozuka said. "Once it starts rolling, it's hard to change directions and almost impossible to stop."

"Do you want to change directions?" Shiiba asked.

Shinozuka shrugged and smiled ruefully. "I used to think I did. Nowadays I just want to clean up the street that the rock is rolling on, so it has a nice, even path. But that perfect world doesn't exist, of course. My priority right now is to keep my wits about me."

Shinozuka had his own opinion of the police establishment. When Yukari died, he could have grown disillusioned, but he held his personal feelings in check and kept himself going.

"Remember that painting you gave me as a housewarming gift? I hung it in my room," Shinozuka said. "I have a lot of Cassigneul's work, but that one's my favorite. Did you have any reason for choosing it?"

Shiiba could instantly visualize the painting in great detail. A sad-eyed girl stood on a terrace, bright red flowers blooming at her feet. She wore a wide black hat and a white dress with black polka dots. In the background, a small boat floated on a lake on a lazy summer day.

"One day I passed by a gallery and it caught my eye," Shiiba admitted. "I don't know much about art, but I could definitely tell it was a Cassigneul. I remembered that you were a fan, so I bought it. The girl kind of reminded me of Yukari."

"Really? I thought she looked like you," Shinozuka said.

Shiiba looked surprised.

"Yukari died tragically, but she was so happy when she was alive," Shinozuka

gently explained. “I loved her bright smile more than anything. But the girl in the painting looks sad. You’ve looked like that ever since Yukari passed away.”

Shinozuka is right, Shiiba thought. Yukari had always been a happy person. It was Shiiba’s memories of her that were sad.

“You can’t run away from the pain, Masaki,” Shinozuka said firmly. “Or your life will just stagnate. There will be more pain in the future. Do you agree?” He gently smiled at Shiiba again. “Do you know the title of the painting?”

Shiiba shook his head.

“It’s called *The Lost Dream*. Our loved ones can never come back to us. Time has stopped for them, but it keeps on going for those left behind. We have to keep going, too, no matter how much it hurts. That’s our duty to them.” Shinozuka knew Shiiba was still thinking about Nagakura. “Whenever you think you just can’t go on, come to see me again. I’ll always be here for you, and that’s a promise.”

Shinozuka’s kindness made Shiiba feel warm inside. His frozen heart seemed to thaw a little.

“Even if you make a mistake, I’ll still be here,” Shinozuka assured him.

Shiiba felt new courage growing inside him. Though their paths didn’t cross much, this man would always be his friend.

“I’d better hop on the Chiyoda line now. Where are you going?” Shinozuka asked.

“Marunouchi line.”

There was a chilly breeze this spring evening, but Shiiba didn’t even feel the cold. Reluctant to leave each other, the brothers-in-law walked to the station together.

“So why are you here?” Munechika muttered from the sofa.

Piano music filled the room. Shiiba didn’t know the name of the piece, but it

sounded melancholy.

“I came to see you,” Shiiba said quietly, approaching him.

“Why?” Munechika asked, putting down his drink.

“I don’t need a reason to see my S. Or do I?” Shiiba replied, making eye contact.

Munechika smiled a little. “Are you a masochist then? I still see your bruises from the other night. Did you come here hoping for more? I can beat you up if you want.”

“Fine. I’m not running away from you again,” Shiiba said defiantly.

Munechika laughed again, but it sounded a little forced. “Really? Even now that you’ve seen the real me?”

“That wasn’t the real you,” Shiiba said firmly. “You don’t get your kicks from mindless violence.”

“Shiiba, violence isn’t mindless,” Munechika retorted. “It’s an action. If you want to hit me, you hit me. That’s all there is to it.”

“Maybe. But that night you were testing me, testing my resolve. Am I right?”

Shiiba had come to that conclusion a few days ago, and was now looking to Munechika for confirmation.

Munechika was quiet for a moment.

“You’re an idiot,” he finally said. “I was just giving you an excuse to leave. This is your last chance to get away from me, Shiiba. Understand?”

“No. All I understand is that I am yours,” Shiiba said softly.

Munechika slowly stood up to face Shiiba. He put his hand under Shiiba’s chin and looked deeply into his eyes.

“This is your last chance,” Munechika repeated. “If you leave now, I won’t follow you. But if you stay, I’ll never let you go. I’ll chase you to the ends of the earth, if necessary...”

Munechika fell silent, but the fire in his eyes still burned. Shiiba started to tremble, feeling lost in Munechika's powerful gaze.

Normally Shiiba didn't express his emotions, but this man was a demon. One simple touch of his hand aroused an unquenchable passion in Shiiba.

"Do you still want me to be your S? If you do, you have to make another promise," Munechika said firmly.

Shiiba clenched his fists. Munechika wasn't just an S to him. He was a man.

But Shiiba was still a detective, and no matter how deeply he fell in love, he couldn't forget himself. He was bound and determined not to make the same mistakes Nagakura had done.

"My S is an important partner," he vowed. "And I'll never betray him. If my S is in danger, I'll protect him, put my life on the line for him..."

Munechika listened silently, and then pulled Shiiba close to him. Buried in Munechika's strong arms, Shiiba's heart skipped a beat.

"You're such an idiot..." Munechika whispered.

Shiiba loved this man. No matter what he did, no matter how much it hurt, he couldn't help loving this man. But he locked those feelings deep inside his heart.

Shiiba wasn't going to betray himself, even if he had to betray his own feelings. He had to stay strong, because love was a sweet illusion that would make him weak. Their relationship would probably grow stronger, but he would grow stronger, too. He would ignore the feelings, chase them away—do anything not to love. That was the only way they could stay together.

If he didn't love Munechika, then he couldn't betray him. The two went hand in hand. Shiiba wanted to be strong, but not brittle like before. What he needed was a flexible strength, one that would bend in the breeze, but never snap. That was how he could go on.

But his heart was weak inside. Humans were weak, tragic creatures. They longed for warm arms to hold them.

The faces of the people who had left him floated in Shiiba's mind. His eyes filled with tears, trying to wash the images away. He had no idea why he was crying now, buried in Munechika's arms.

"Don't cry. What's there to cry about?" Munechika whispered.

"You made me cry. So let me," Shiiba sobbed.

Munechika kissed the tears that streamed down Shiiba's face. His caresses felt nice, but they couldn't stop Shiiba from crying.

Forgive me just this once. Let me be weak. Let me cling to your strength. We can be together for a little while...

"Munechika," Shiiba whispered. "Sleep with me."

Munechika pulled Shiiba close.

"I was going to, even if you didn't ask me," he said with a smile.

This time, Shiiba took off his clothes himself.

As he grabbed both of Munechika's hands, their fingers intertwined. They kissed over and over again, fanning the flames of passion. Soon Shiiba was gasping for breath.

Munechika buried his head in Shiiba's chest and sucked on his nipples, as Shiiba twisted Munechika's hair between his fingers.

Their last encounter had been so violent, but this time they both craved gentleness.

After a while, Munechika's lips found Shiiba's again. Shiiba spread his legs, but to his surprise, Munechika didn't try to enter him.

"Wh-why aren't you—?" Shiiba sputtered.

"Do you want me to?" Munechika asked lazily.

"Yes. I want you to. I want to feel you..."

Munechika grabbed his penis and positioned it outside Shiiba's hole. Finally

he pushed himself in. Shiiba moaned, both from pain and satisfaction. He moaned louder with each thrust, sweet music to Munechika's ears.

"Don't make so much noise!" Munechika teased. "I won't be able to stop."

"You don't have to...stop...ahhhhh!"

"Idiot! I wanted to savor every minute of it."

"Who said I wanted to savor it...ahhhhhhh!"

Shiiba wrapped his legs around Munechika, moving his hips in rhythm with him.

"Are you trying to get me to come?" Munechika gasped. He grabbed Shiiba's legs and pounded into him even harder.

Now Shiiba couldn't even move, he could only accept Munechika's cock.

"Ahhhhh...Munechika..."

"Just be good," Munechika whispered. His penis was deeply inside Shiiba now.

Shiiba was losing himself to his mounting excitement. It felt so good, such pure pleasure.

It also hurt, but Shiiba vowed to ride through the pain. His hesitation had completely vanished. He could finally forgive himself for wanting Munechika like this.

Shiiba's own penis started to drip. No longer could he hide his shame, his fear, or even his anticipation. Everything was right out there for Munechika to see.

Shiiba grabbed Munechika's arms, pleading for the end.

"I can't...I'm coming...ah...ah...ahhhhhh!"

"Me, too...uggggh!"

Shiiba soared to oblivion. Munechika grimaced as he ejaculated inside him.

It was like a storm had just passed over them. They didn't move for a while,

just held each other and panted for breath.

Then Munechika pulled out of Shiiba and kissed his head.

“I think you like this now,” he said with a smile.

“What?” Shiiba asked hazily.

“The after-glow,” Munechika whispered.

“Tonight I do,” Shiiba admitted.

Shiiba felt that they were finally back to normal, yet something had changed between them. Something had been confirmed.

Munechika nibbled on his neck.

“What are you doing?” Shiiba asked.

“Oh, I forgot. You don’t like love bites,” Munechika said hastily.

“That’s not what I mean,” Shiiba said.

Though Nagakura’s bite marks were still there, they would soon fade. But the mark Nagakura had left on Shiiba’s heart would never go away.

“Your colleague was killed by an Ikkou Society bullet,” Munechika said, holding Shiiba tight.

“Yeah.”

Shiiba had given him the rough details, but Munechika already seemed to know.

“He made a mistake. He fell in love with his S and it destroyed him,” Shiiba said bluntly.

In Nagakura’s case, it had been only a matter of time. Nagakura hated Kunugi, but also hated himself. He was on the path to destruction, and no one could have stopped him.

“It happens. Love destroys people sometimes. Nagakura knew it, but couldn’t stop,” Munechika sighed.

Shiiba sensed Munechika had more to say.

“Have you ever loved somebody like that?” he asked.

Munechika softly stroked Shiiba’s cheek. “Yes.”

“When?”

Munechika got a faraway look in his eyes. “A long time ago. A long, long time ago.”

Though Munechika held Shiiba in his arms, he was thinking of someone else, someone he had loved before.

Shiiba wondered what kind of person could have captured this man’s heart. Someone he would have ruined himself for...

Shiiba felt something sting in the depths of his heart, but pushed the feeling aside. He didn’t need to know. That was a place he just couldn’t go.

No matter what they did from now on, no matter how much they wanted each other, tonight had been a confirmation. They were still an S and his detective, and so much more.



Some desires will never go away. The desire to keep going. The desire to be strong. The desire to never lose someone.

But even if he had to betray himself, Shiiba would hesitate no longer.

In Munechika's arms, Shiiba had finally found a home.

Afterword

This book is the continuation of *S, Volume One*. The previous novel tells how Munechika and Shiiba first met, so please give it a read.

Here are a few tidbits about what went on during this book's creation. I had so much trouble with the first draft I could barely see straight. Sometimes I felt completely confused, and when something's not good, you have to fix it. I consulted my editor, and then wrote a second draft that was slightly different.

The character who changed most was Nagakura. Originally he was a big brother-type who blushed whenever he shared his feelings. After the revisions, he became a wisecracking old man with sophisticated (and wicked) intentions! You'll probably either love him or hate him, but he's a key person in this book.

As for the two main characters, now that Shiiba has finally acknowledged his feelings for Munechika, their relationship has moved forward a little. But since they haven't really progressed to "love," Shiiba still has lots of emotional stress ahead of him. As Shiiba goes through his tribulations, he becomes even more suave and sexy.

My editor gave me lots of advice this time, for which I'm grateful. "Does this sound okay?" I kept asking. "Last time you took out a lot, this time even more! But it still looks good," my editor gently replied. Oh, you're so wise...

To all my readers: I received lots of feedback about the first *S*, and thank you from the bottom of my heart. Because of you I'll be writing *S, Volume Three* next year. I hope Munechika will take on a more active role. Maybe a showdown between two mob bosses? It's fun to play around with ideas right now.

To Chiharu Nara: thanks so much for your cover art and interior illustrations. I also thank you for showing them to me while they were still works-in-progress. I was moved to see them in their finished state. Your drawings are utterly wonderful. Hope you will grace me with your talent again.

The lovely folks at SHY NOVELS plan to release the next volume in the spring, so see you all then!

S

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